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# WARP AND WOOF:

OR, THE

REMINISCENCES OF DORIS FLETCHER.

BY HOLME LEE,

AUTHOR OF "SYLVAN HOLT'S DAUGHTER," "AGAINST WIND AND  
TIDE," ETC.

"Quelque différence qui paraisse entre les fortunes, il y a une certaine compensation de biens et de maux qui les rend égales."—*Roche foucauld*.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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# WARP AND WOOF.

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## I.

### AVONMORE CHURCH BELLS.

THIS afternoon I was lying on my couch by the open window when the sweet peal of bells over the water at Avonmore Church began to ring. I covered my eyes and listened.

“So long ago, so long ago, so long, long ago!” they seemed to say; “so long ago, so long ago, so long, long ago!”

They kept up the monotonous burden for full half an hour, but they rang it in different keys. At first in a plaintive minor, mournful, regretful; then they clashed it out wildly, seized with a fit of recklessness; then they whistled it down the wind as something past praying for; then they

broke forth rejoicing that it was over and done with; then they jangled it all out of tune and died into silence with a broken moan. "So long ago, so long, long ago, so long ago."

I was in an idle, fanciful mood when the bells began to ring, and they chimed the echoes to it in the far-off, silent lands of memory. I had been turning over my old Thought-Book—faded annal of hopes and sorrows which have been as coffin-dust these many, many years. With sad amazement I had recognized the antic figures of my former self inditing these treacherous records of futility. Long lines of spectral faces, so like and yet unlike my own, had looked at me from the yellow pages with strange filmy eyes. The passions, fears, joys, doubts, chronicled with such verve and distinctness in the passing, time had quite rubbed out of my memory or left them only as a shadowy smear. I had forgotten to care for them any more; they were the broken toys, the hard lessons, the merry holidays, the solemn chastisements of my youth, and I had done with them; when suddenly from the leaves of my old Thought-Book, they started up again into wan,

white, wasted life and trooped across the sunshine, and filled the room.

I might have grown sorrowful amongst my phantom company, as well as idle and fanciful, but just as the bells ceased I heard the children's voices in the garden, and looking up where the shadows of the great elm-trees in the hedgerow began to lengthen across the grass, I saw them coming with their mother through the wicket-gate from the Old Grove Fields. They tumbled in over the low window sill, all eager to speak at once and tell their adventures in the meadows where they had been to watch the haymakers at work; while their mother stayed outside looking in upon us like a lovely rose in a garland of leaves. The sweet, velvety faces pressed round me, warm, breathless, and dishevelled; the boys stood upon the floor, but fat little Trot made a cushion of herself upon my feet, and immediately I was strewn over with the spoils that filled their dimpled hands, and in the merry prattle of their innocent lips the solemn echo of the bells was drowned.

I am but a poor invalid pinned day and night

to my couch, and as I cannot go out into the fields any more, the fields come to me in pretty posies. These tiny, tender feet bring the seasons into my quiet room with violets for spring, wild roses for midsummer, golden ears of harvest for autumn, and scarlet-berried holly for cold Christmas. And in return I tell them stories without end, illustrated by much pantomimic action: they begged for one to-day, and as soon as it was finished their mother carried them off lest they should tire me over-much, and nurse Bradshaw came in to gather up the litter those "blessed bairns" always leave behind as token of their visits. She then brought in my tea and a bit of village gossip with it, and having communicated that and shaken up my cushions, she admitted Cosy, the cat, for his evening meal of "tea-cup tea," and then left us to the enjoyment of each other's society.

The air was so still that in the garden I could not see a leaf stir; but as I fell athinking again I had a strange illusion of sound. I heard the Avonmore Church bells ringing high up in the clouds with the same burden as before, but more



even and more solemn. "So long ago, so long ago, so long, long ago! So long ago, so long ago, so long, long ago!"

I gave myself up to them: I let them carry me over a plain of level years to the troublous times when first we came to live at Redcross, to times earlier than those; to the days of my father's prosperity when we were all young, and bonnie, bonnie Roseberry was our home. The joys and sorrows of others as well as of myself rose from their graves, and the loves and hates of some who have ceased loving and hating in this world for ever. What the bells and the old Thought-Book said to me I am going to relate to you, but more of others than of myself. My own story is one of those which can be told in less than half a dozen pages—a story cut short in the first chapter with "Why?" for its finis. In this life it will not be answered, but one day I shall know for what good reason of God the hope of my youth was taken away, and I was left to wither through long, painful years into the state of sheer helplessness in which I lie now.

## II.

## FALLEN IN THE WORLD.

“BREAD’s promised and water’s sure.”

The above quotation from nurse Bradshaw’s proverbial philosophy occupies half a line in my old Thought-Book under the date of a day ever memorable in our family. It was the day when my father’s ruin was first intimated to us. Whether our hearts were stayed from grieving by that dry crumb of comfort, I cannot remember now, but I conjecture not.

We were all of an age to feel the change acutely. Connie, the youngest of us, was fifteen, Ursula was nineteen, and the two boys were seventeen and eighteen respectively. My father had been twice married. I was his only child by his first wife who died very young in bringing me into the world: I was now nearly one-and-twenty, and engaged to Philip Massey.

My engagement was of three years' standing, for my father would not consent, as he always declared, to any of his daughters marrying before they were of age. I had been very happy and contented during this interval of probation. In Philip I saw all that my heart desired; we were truly attached to each other, and suited in age, in tastes, in pursuits, and in temper. He was the first friend who appeared at Roseberry when my father's ruin became public; he sought me at once, and in the midst of the suffering and anxiety of that trouble, I had the precious consolation of his assurance that we could not be divided by any adverse stroke of fortune. But the severance which poverty was powerless to produce came from the mighty hand of death. Three days after I had seen him he was smitten with fever; in less than a fortnight the grave had closed over him, and all the sweet summer of my life was past.

Of this period I find in the old Thought-Book but a single entry: "Wherever I turn, wherever I look, but one thought meets me—*Philip is dead*; I try to be busy with my hands, but they soon

drop paralyzed, and I sit feeling in every nerve that Philip is dead; I sit in the sunshine, cold to my heart's core, for *Philip is dead.*"

The anguish of that great bereavement has been long grieved down, and I can think of it quite calmly now. There are pains harder, *far* harder to bear than the *death* of what we love. I can remember him without a shadow of reproach; he was always generous, noble, loving. I shall never see his equal until I see him again where there are no partings any more for ever.

This blow, falling in the midst of the wider calamity, would have put me aside had I suffered it; but I kept up my heart and my courage constantly by saying, "It is the will of God;" and so, by slow degrees, resignation came. It seemed a dreary out-look into life at first, but the necessity of taking thought for others dispersed the darkest clouds. Nature had blessed me with a cheerful spirit, and in the simple interests of everyday life I still found sources of happiness which made the world tolerable, even when I regarded it as a place through which my own path would lie always solitary.

I have had many sunshiny days since then, and have found contentment, ease, and enjoyment, in quite unanticipated ways and places. "Old maid," that name of dread to us when we are young, has ceased to have any terrible significance. I have friends whom I love, and who love me, and the solitary path is very far from lonely.

Ursula had been introduced a year, and reveling in all the pleasures that youth, health, spirits, and money, could give her. She was fond of company, of dress, of personal ease and luxury. She was proud of Roseberry, proud of having it said that the Fletchers had the finest house, the handsomest equipage, and the best kept place in the neighbourhood. She looked to receive a good fortune and to marry well, though, as yet, she had had no chance of an independent settlement in life. In consequence, she bore our reverses grievously. She railed against the speculative mania of men in business and imputed blame to papa in the severest manner. She deplored our loss of position and vehemently declared that she could not do this or that, or

bear the other which we might resign ourselves to ; she was not brought up to stinting or poverty, and she early announced her intention of going out as governess into some nobleman's family, if she did not find things as comfortable as she was used to have them in the new home to which we should be obliged to betake ourselves.

Connie kept her bright sweet face through all the dark time, cheering every one of us with her cheerfulness. She was young and unaccustomed to the ways of the world, and perhaps she appreciated less clearly than the rest of us the effects of the change.

She had the joyous heart that is equal to any fortune, and was the last creature in the house to conceive sentimental distresses or to aggravate a trial by always turning it the dark side uppermost. But she was to have her poignant share of the grief, too, by and bye, poor child. She was my father's favourite and the darling of her brothers ; and these brothers were soon to leave us, to be separated from us by half the world, to go and make them a new home in a new country, and to say good-bye to England for ever.



They were just of the age when their way through life must be decided for good or for evil. Anthony had been intended for the army, Herbert for the bar ; neither of them had ever shown any inclination for commerce. They had always enjoyed large allowances and had contracted expensive habits ; but now that all the money had run out of their father's purse and left it lean and empty, they could no longer draw upon that generous source. They were handsome, clever, spirited boys to whom hardship was a word unknown ; but it met them now face to face, and their fine prospects vanished in a moment.

Just at this crisis there was a great talk of the gold-countries ; rumour circulated florid stories of fortunes won by the lucky delving of a spade and turned hundreds of wild heads ; our two dear ones amongst the number. They also would emigrate, they also would go to Australia. Papa was just in that state of mind when anything that promised to release him from the constant pressure of self-reproach was esteemed a blessing. It annoyed him to see the boys hanging

about the house, idle, unhinged, with nothing certain or hopeful before them, so that when their project came to be discussed, he received it almost with favour.

Anthony possessed a volume of the *Adventures of an Emigrant*, which he had probably read before without any special interest, but now Herbert and he were constantly laying their heads together over it and talking low, apart from the rest of us. We had our suspicions, but we kept them to ourselves, and they said never a word of their designs until one evening, when they were standing listlessly by the window after a prolonged private discussion, papa querulously exclaimed, "God help us! what is to become of those boys? They will be ruined if this indolence gets a hold on them. Go out, take a walk, do something, lads; it worries me to death to see you mooning about all day at a loose end!"

This gave them an opening to speak. Anthony came immediately, and standing on the hearth before him, said,—

"Papa, Bertie and I have made up our minds to emigrate." He looked away from his mother



as he spoke, and there was the white tremulousness about his lips which betrayed a strongly controlled excitement.

For a moment or two there was dead silence, and then Herbert added,—

“The world is not so far round as it used to be: steamships, railways, and electric telegraphs have all but annihilated time and space.”

His mother forced a plaintive smile, and papa said regretfully,—

“Ah, he would have made a capital lawyer: black is always white when he handles it.”

Anthony then began to make it clear to us that their best, and, in fact, their only way of getting on in life was to emigrate, and papa was not ready with any substantial arguments to advance against it. It was perfectly true that the professions to which they had looked were not fit for necessitous men, and that to establish themselves here in any manner they must descend, and to descend is an intolerable mortification to the young and ardent. Herbert seconded all that his brother said in a quiet, clinching tone peculiar to himself, while their mother looked

at them with wistful, beseeching tenderness, incredulous yet that they would *really* leave her. And as they talked, insensibly their voices and countenances quickened with hope; how should they know the anxious fears, the pitiful yearnings of her heart towards them? When the parent nest breaks up and the young birds' wings are grown, it is a law of nature that they should spread them in the blue heaven and sail away, far away, out of sight, whence all the straining of fond eyes and all the longing of loving hearts can bring them back no more!

## III.

## OUR FAMILY.

I CANNOT say that ruin came without warning. For more than a year my father had ceased to spend lavish sums in pictures and useless ornaments for the house, and for many months he had worn an anxious face. He was in the habit of telling mamma everything, and she looked anxious too. Once I heard her say :—" Shall we put down the carriage?" but he replied : " That would be a mere drop in an ocean. No, let things go on as usual; it is just possible that we may tide over the danger, if Mortimer and the rest stand."

But his slender hope was not to be fulfilled. For seven-and-twenty years of his commercial existence his prosperity had known no check; in the twenty-eighth adverse public events and

rash speculations shook the old house, and in the twenty-ninth it came down with a crash. The firm of Fletcher, Dashwood & Co., founded in his grandfather's time, went into the Gazette with several others, as long established and once as highly reputed. It was a terrible shock to all of us, but to my father it was almost death. He never held his head up afterwards, so to speak, and though he survived the loss of fortune, position, and influence into extreme old age, he never grew reconciled to it.

Roseberry had belonged to the Villers' family, and was a handsome residence when my father bought it, but he was then in the flood-tide of his prosperity, and he expended a fortune in additions and improvements. Everything indoors and out that modern invention produced or modern taste perfected came to Roseberry. There was incessant change, and redecoration. I could never feel that the rooms grew familiar; I think they were too spacious, too fine, and too fresh for comfort. Mamma's boudoir upstairs was the pleasantest place in the house. Annual innovation did not intrude there; the carpet

ceased to glow, the tints of the curtains faded, the gilt frames of our pictures toned down, and when my father would have replaced them with something new, she gently restrained him, saying she liked it better as it was.

But out of doors in the beautiful gardens we had our haunts undisturbed for years, and those we children dearly loved. When it was first said, "We must leave Roseberry—Roseberry must be sold," Connie and I betook ourselves to a shady roost amongst certain ancient yew-trees that grew in a sweet glen, and cried as if our hearts would break. It was our pet play-place when we were little things, and always our favourite holiday resort with favourite books.

We had enjoyed a happy childhood and youth, all of us, for which, thank God; it is a blessing that has followed us all the days of our lives. Whatever we may have been called on to endure since, we have not suffered from the far-reaching echoes of infantine misery. Oh, I have such a pity for sad little children—crushed, baited, kept out of the sunshine, until their souls are warped into distorted caricatures that no painful

years of after striving can ever turn back to the semblance of God. They remind me of those plants which Humboldt saw in the Cavern of Guachero, growing in darkness, pallid, irreco-g-nizable, with the hoarse cries of nocturnal birds and the rush of subterraneous waters filling the air with a tumult of hell—phantom plants, demon plants, without a trace of likeness to any seed which springs up in the light of Heaven !

Mamma was as much a mother to me as to her own children ; there was no distinction amongst us, unless it were in my favour, who had all the privileges of eldership. She was a pious, cultivated, gentle, affectionate woman, thoroughly unselfish and full of tender consideration for those about her, but withal firm, just and clear-sighted in her guidance of her family ; never swayed by partialities, never temporizing or making circuit by expedencies, but laying down to us the same direct principles of right and duty by which she governed herself.

Our nurse was a north-country woman from the same place as my mother. She took me into her arms when her young mistress died, she



saw my father bring home her successor; upon her knees my brothers and sisters were weaned; she lived with us through the time of our prosperity, and remained faithful in our adversity; she came with us to our new home at Redcross, and she is with me still—trusty friend and servant, the last left to me of all the once merry household at Roseberry. We were equally fortunate in our governess, Miss Heywood, who came to take charge of my education when I was eight years old, and stayed with us until our home was broken up. Perhaps her system of training might be considered narrow in these days of new theories and universal knowledge, but we were indebted to her for much that ameliorated our descent into poverty. She was greatly given to the cultivation of the minor morals. She endeavoured to form in us orderly habits of mind, a taste for good reading, accuracy of observation, clearness of thought, and steadfastness of purpose. She was herself a right-headed, well-balanced woman with a keen sense of justice and a shrewd penetration. Her ethical problems were not always such as are brought

before children, but we have worked some of them out in our own experience since and have found them correctly stated. I remember on one occasion, when we had been reading a history of strange family vicissitudes, she said,—

“I have seen striking reverses in my time, and perhaps it may be the fate of some of you to suffer from similar changes. Well, children, and if it be” (and here she spread her hands abroad, as if making light of it),—“you must look upon it, though it come by the carelessness, wickedness, or unavoidable misfortunes of others, as a dispensation of Providence,—and dispensations of Providence are not meant to break our hearts, severely as they may try them. I would have you learn to look life honestly in the face, not making much ado about nothings, but the best of it under all circumstances. And to that end I want each of you to cultivate by practice and reflection the special gifts of mind that you possess; so that, in any sudden shock of calamity you may be capable of turning your hands to this or that as a means of self-support. You may be just as much gentlewomen giving



music-lessons, mending your husband's clothes, and earning your children's bread as you could be happy mistresses in wealthy homes. It is an established principle of mine that work and poverty, of themselves, never degraded any educated woman yet."

Ursula was rather impatient of these *lectures*, as she called them, but Connie and I listened with negligent indifference. It seemed so unlikely that *we* should ever come to want, so unlikely that *we* should ever need to work. The details of penury were more unreal to us than the wildest romance. I once ventured to say so, and Miss Heywood, looking me frankly in the face, replied,—

"Ask your father, Doris, and he will tell you that for every guinea he can count, my father could once have counted ten. Yet I am thankful now for a home under his roof, for the office of teaching you, and for the salary I earn which helps to maintain my mother." We were all shocked and startled, and Connie, with her sweet affectionateness, threw her arms round her neck, bidding her never mind. "I don't

mind now, my dear, one gets used to skinning by and by," was her answer.

Afterwards when we were alone, I said, how sorry I was that I should have awakened sorrowful remembrances, and she told me a little more of herself.

"I was about your own age, Doris, and that does not seem so *very* long ago," she said in her quiet way; "but I lost more than the mere power to be lazy and luxurious. You know for yourself what it is to centre life and hope in another dearer than all friends or all kindred besides. I once looked to be happy wife and happy mother as certainly as you; but when my father was ruined, Richard Arlington's family set themselves against me, and his father said, that though he would not absolutely forbid his son to fulfil his engagement, he should be very thankful were it broken off. This was brought to my ears by a mutual acquaintance, and I offered to release him—perhaps I ought not to blame him too severely that he took me at my word." I asked her what became of him afterwards. "Oh," she said, "he married a very

lovely and loveable woman, and I believe their union was perfectly suitable and happy." After a pause, she asked me if I recollected the last time we were at Redcross, noticing a handsome boy of about nine years old, with very fine blue eyes, who was always building sand fortifications about the North Rocks. I said I recollected him very well. "That was one of his children," replied she.

I remember even yet looking at her and trying to repaint her face with the tints of youth, but all in vain. I could see only sharpened features, sallow skin, and pepper and salt-coloured hair—I suppose she must have been three or four and thirty at this date, and when I was a girl, an unmarried woman of that age appeared to me as old as the hills. It seemed as strange that she should ever have had a love-story as it had seemed before that her father should once have been richer than ours.

Sprightly young folks are apt to be rather hard and incredulous touching the sentimental episodes in the lives of their withered elders—I have had a little experience of it myself, since

I lost my bloom and my hair began to turn grey—but now and then, a sharp pang of their own softens them, as it did me, into a very early and intimate sympathy with those who have loved and lost when hope was at its brightest and a disappointment of the heart was the most tragical event in the ominous list of mortal miseries. I remember when Philip Massey died how good Miss Heywood was to me, and how I had more consolation in her silent kindness than I had in everybody else's well-meant but empty exhortations. She knew what I suffered, and she knew also that prayer and patience would soothe the asperity of my pain and bring me safely through that dark pass from which I beheld my dear love departing on his solemn journey into the valley of the shadow of death.

From that time I began to know what anguish and what comfort, what sorrow and what fortitude, what persecution and what forbearance, what vain desires and long disappointments enter into most men's and women's lives. But to foresee the thorns that will pierce *ourselves* would be more than we could bear—mercifully are they

hidden under flowers of hope or quiet assurance—I did not foresee the great calamity that was to make my existence now one tedious lengthening of physical pain. I thought I had endured my sharpest trial and that henceforward if my way was to be solitary it would also be safe. I fancied I had a *claim* on the tenderness of Him who had bereaved me of so much already; but when I was healed of that wound, He laid upon me another cross which I must carry heavily until I have leave to rest under it in my grave. I do not seek to know *why*? It is a problem past answering; but I try to say from my soul, “God’s will be done!” and that simplifies all my difficulties.

We were not driven away from the Roseberry without time given us to seek a new home, but the chief part of the household was discharged, horses and carriages were sold, and the rooms were stript of their costliest adornments. The house itself was no longer our own; but in arranging the sale it had been conditioned that we should not be required to leave it until September, which gave us an interval of three

months to look about us and settle our future plans.

My father had been the very soul of hospitality; he loved to entertain his friends, and Roseberry was a place to which his friends loved to come. We lost sight of most of them at this period of our disasters, but that might be less their fault than we were then disposed to admit. Betwixt Fortune and Misfortune there is certainly a great gulf fixed, and Ill-luck must make a very long arm indeed to retain his grasp of those with whom he once walked hand in hand in the sunshine of prosperity. But whenever it has been our chance since to come in contact with those who knew us in old times, I am sure they have always spoken of my father with a most generous remembrance, though he would never believe it.

“No, no,” he would say, with feeble bitterness, “when the world went wrong with me, all my friends went the way of the world.”

The first thing for us to consider now was where we must live and what we should have to live upon. My father’s private debts were paid to the uttermost farthing, but his commercial



liabilities were, I have understood, enormous. There was some blame, though no dishonour, attached to his name, and he met with the respectful usage of a man who has done his best to avert the consequences of a lost battle. He might even have begun the world again, but he was too old; he was out of heart, thoroughly beaten, discouraged and broken down.

Though not hardly dealt with by his creditors, out of the wrecks of Roseberry splendour only the merest pittance was reserved; so small a pittance, indeed, that a cousin of mamma's, Sir Archibald Grant, offered to increase it by a pension of a hundred a year during her own and her husband's lifetime. I possessed five thousand pounds which came to me from my own mother, and, with the interest of that put into the common stock, we agreed that we might live in some cheap, quiet neighbourhood without any of us girls being obliged to throw ourselves upon the world. This was what I would have strained every nerve to prevent. At home with papa, mamma and the rest of them, I knew I could put my hand to any needful work, but not amongst strangers, as

a dependant earning a wage—that I shrank from with absolute avoidance, though I saw that Ursula contemplated the possibility without any disfavour whatever.

I had for myself a third alternative which I was almost on the point of forgetting. My uncle Sibthorpe volunteered to receive me and constitute me housekeeper over his bachelor establishment in Russell Square, but I had no inclination for the dignity. He was a sarcastic, unsociable man, getting into years, very wealthy and very near; he had a few acquaintance of the same type as himself, who came to his dinners, talked of the age and cost of their wines, and measured everybody and everything by the money standard. It was candidly represented to me what substantial advantages I was throwing away by declining my uncle's proposal, but I could not look upon it in that light at all. The slow tedium of such a life as I must have led with him would have eaten out my heart. He was offended, and betrayed it by never again giving me my annual invitation to his house; also he wrote me word that some day I should learn what I had lost by



my foolishness. Perhaps I lost a great fortune—I neither know nor care. He left his money to found an hospital for the incurable sick, which has been a wider and more permanent blessing by far than if he had bequeathed it to enrich a single woman like myself.

## IV.

## SHADOWS BEFORE.

WHEN the scheme of our going to live at Redcross was first mooted, Ursula threw cold water upon it and snubbed it as she would have snubbed any plan that did not originate with herself. She said without circumlocution that she hated the country. Connie asked her why.

“*Why?*” retorted she pettishly; “*why* enough, I’m sure. Living in the country means having a neighbour with whom you are not on terms; a house as silent as a church on week-days; a caller once a month, a tea-fight once a quarter, and deadly liveliness all the year round. It means taking a walk of three miles through muddy lanes where you don’t meet a soul, it means contracting narrow views of life; it means every stupid amusement and innocent dulness under the sun. I once lived in the country for six months with

old aunt Maria, and I have detested it ever since."

Miss Heywood's uncompromising good sense soon took the wind out of the sails of Ursula's sweeping definition.

"That is what living in the country might mean to a woman with an empty head and a hollow heart," said she; "to a woman cursed with a capricious temper, a craving for excitement, and an intense selfishness. It would never present such a dreary level of monotony to any one in a healthy state of mind."

Ursula put on her stubborn face and answered again,—

"I would as lief go into a convent as into the country to be mewed up in complete solitude. There is so much pride in those little provincial communities that the fact of papa having been in trade and, moreover, unfortunate in trade, will be quite enough, I expect, to shut us out of the best set; and I am quite determined not to put up with the second best. I would rather have no society at all than be condemned to that of under-bred and half-educated people. If we do

go to live in the country you will see that it will end in my taking a situation."

Mamma looked grieved but she said nothing, and Miss Heywood calmly replied,—

"The discipline would probably do you good, Ursula; the idea is worth considering. But with regard to living in the country, you speak ignorantly. Any young woman who distinguished herself chiefly by her asperity of temper would be avoided both in provincial society and elsewhere; but a pleasant person who meets kindness with kindness, and courtesy with courtesy, is acceptable in most companies."

Ursula looked piqued and raised her brows in feigned contempt; and poor mamma who was watching her and knew that there was no peace for anybody unless she were pleased, ventured to remark that perhaps Redcross was rather out of the way, upon which Ursula, with her usual perversity, immediately veered round and exclaimed,—

"Out of the way! So much the better! What people in our circumstances want is to get out of the way!"

"Perhaps, my dear, it would be advisable for you to remain silent until you have heard what those have to advance who know their own minds," said Miss Heywood. "It appears that you are in one of your fits of unreason."

Connie now spoke up.

"Redcross is a place that would amuse papa; he could walk in and out to Scarccliffe for his newspaper every day, and as mamma likes quiet and a garden, it would suit her. When we have been down there for a month in the summer, we have always said it was a paradise of a place. Nurse is quite fond of it, and I think we might be almost luxuriously poor in such a pretty spot."

Ursula intimated her contempt for Connie's paradoxical use of terms, and wished to know whether I had any views to state.

I said, "Yes; I thought, for my part, that we should find more of the amusements and occupations of our age in such a place as Redcross than we should in a dozy cathedral town, a bustling manufacturing neighbourhood, or a thoroughly rural district."

Mamma agreed with me.

"I know no preferable locality," said she; "I was always fond of it myself, and our visits there were a treat to you all as children. Suppose I speak to papa about it at once?"

"Well!" cried Ursula, the passionate tears rushing into her eyes; "if I am not to be consulted, it is of no consequence. I shall not stay at home long to be a burden anywhere, and Redcross will do as well as another place to come to in my holidays."

"You have been consulted, Ursula," interposed Miss Heywood; "and you have expressed your sentiments with your usual emphasis and lack of consideration for others; but as we think them erroneous, we do not come into them—that is all."

Ursula was silenced for the present, but mamma was perplexed by her opposition, and might even have been influenced by it to the setting aside of the Redcross plan altogether, had we not combined to urge that it was only one of her common gusts of perversity, which, now that it had had vent, would probably soon blow over. But the fact was that Ursula really desired impracticable things. She wanted to stay near London and

to go on enjoying all the gaieties and pleasures of the last year, exactly as if nothing had happened; and mamma and the rest of us shrank from the ordeal of genteel penury, as we had witnessed it there, more than we could express. Ursula could not understand it; her lessons of sacrifice and self-denial were yet to learn, and she showed but very little aptitude for those hard lines; she fancied we were all acting in selfish opposition to her, and indulging our own tastes without consideration for hers. When she was in one of these moods, our best way was to turn a deaf ear to all she said, for argument and opposition only served to make her the more invincibly obstinate and persistent in her opinions, and to draw down upon ourselves a storm of pathetic or vehement accusations.

When my father was consulted on the subject, as we had anticipated, he readily acquiesced; he was in the temper to acquiesce in whatever was proposed to him.

“Do what you like,” he said with a jaded air; “one place is much the same to me as another now: don’t let me be troubled, that is all.”



He, however, asked afterwards how our going to live at Redcross would affect the boys. Mamma told him that she was afraid it would not affect them at all—they would not go with us. Town or country, it was a matter of indifference to them. They were very hot and eager about their emigration scheme, and in collecting information and devising their plans they had already found abundant consolation for all foregone disasters.

Nurse Bradshaw shook her head when she was told of their projects, and said to Anthony that if she were in his shoes she would still prefer a hovel in England to a palace in a strange country.

“There is no talk of palaces either here or there, nurse,” replied he; “we shall have to work hard, and fare hard, and live hard.”

“And little enough you’re fit for that, Master Anty,” said she, regarding his limmer young frame with kindly regret.

“Nonsense, woman; there’s the making of a man in me as strong as my grandfather. How long is it since you measured me against the wall

to see how much I had grown in the year? Measure me now, and I believe you will see that I am full as tall as he was in his best days."

"Off with your shoes then, and stand in your stocking feet," cried the dear old soul, and having placed him with his back against the wall, she mounted a chair, laid a rule across his crown, marked the paper with her pencil, and stepped down. "Six foot one and a half, that's what you are; your grandfather was six foot two and over; he shrank a bit as he got into years, but that was neither here nor there."

"Ah, but I've not done growing; and then see my arms, nurse, they're famous for muscle! rowing and cricketing have brought that out. They'll do as good a day's work at gold digging as any navvy's of them all."

"Get away with you, Master Anty, they're as white as a lady's!" cried she, putting the sturdy young limb aside; but suddenly remembering whither all this talk tended, she looked in his face with her own puckered up lamentably and asked, "But are you in real, right earnest about going into these foreign parts?"

"Yes, nurse," replied he, sobered by her solemnity.

"And Master Bertie, is he for going too?"

"Yes."

"And your mother's to lose both of you? It's little comfort some mothers get for the sorrow of bringing bairns into the world and rearing them up to men. Well-a-day! what must be must, we're only dust; if we can't get crumb we must eat crust."

"That's true, nurse, but there's no need to pick out the hardest to break our teeth upon."

"You were always for making the best of things, but I doubt it's a bad bargain you're choosing for yourself now. You'll find blows thicker than butter in them gold countries, I reckon."

"Maybe so. But Bertie and I can hit out as straight and strong as most fellows of our inches."

"I'm not afraid for Master Bertie; he was always a shifty little chap, even here in the nursery. He'll fall on his feet let him go where he will, and wherever there's a cow he'll sup cream; but there was always a soft bit in your

heart, Master Anty, and I doubt but it'll ache when you've gotten so far away from your mother and the rest of us."

"If I had been a soldier you would have lost me too, nursesey."

"But main proud of you should we have been in your scarlet coat and gold lace, with your sword in your hand—blows with that if you like, and as heavy as you please, on the Frenchmen's sconces—can't be too heavy if they're the raskills they were in your grandfather's time, when he was a captain of volunteers."

"Perhaps the Frenchmen would have got a rap at my sconce, and then you might have hung up my sword on the wall, and have just said, 'Good-bye to Anthony.'"

"Ay, ay, maybe it's all right. God knows best; but I'd rather have seen you taking your chance in the hottest of the battle, with Him for your buckler, than digging and delving in the earth for gold. I had two cousins of my own—the eldest, he went to the Spanish Americas, and I've heard no tell of him from that day to this; but Alick, that was all through the Penins'lar

war and was killed at Waterloo, his mother's got his medals in her chest of drawers at this minute. I've a very poor opinion of money, and always had. Them's hardest at heart that's most set on it. Doesn't the very Bible itself say the love of it is the root of all evil?"

Herbert, who had come quietly in with the emigration book in his hand in search of his brother, undertook to answer nurse this time. "But money's a bridge that carries folks over many irksome necessities," said he shrewdly; "and if we had not broken it down under us, we should not be wanting to grope our way through a gully now to find more of it."

"I can't tackle you, Master Bertie; you've such a tongue for twisting and turning things about, like that saint I've heard tell of that could fairly set the stones and trees adancing with his music pipes."

"That was St. Orpheus, nursesey, who turned saint when he lost Eurydice," said Herbert, and leaving the dear old thing mystified with this novel scrap of church history, he and Anthony went off, arm in arm, to discuss privately

some fresh phase in their emigration scheme ; while Connie, nurse and I remained behind disconsolate, to talk it over amongst ourselves and to suggest a thousand vain expedients by which, perhaps, they might be brought to abandon it.

## V.

## FAREWELL.

IT was a very solemn moment when my father gave his formal consent to his sons' departure.

"It is hard, boys, *hard*," said he with deplorable pathos, "but the world has been too hard for me from first to last, and I have no power to advise you. You will not have such a fair start as your father, but maybe you will have better luck."

Mamma sat quiet and silent a long while, holding Anthony by the hand, until papa began to run over old stories of their clever and mischievous childhood and to recount his own disappointed hopes and expectations for them. This was more than she could bear, her mouth quivered with suppressed pain, and saying almost inaudibly, "My dears, I don't want to dishearten you," she left the



room and went away to be by herself, and to seek fortitude, resignation, and comfort where alone they are to be found.

After this evening, arrangements and preparations went on rapidly. A few weeks passed like so many days, and the night before they were to sail arrived. How strange it seemed, how constrained and how silent! We all sat together, but we talked very little, and even of that little I remember nothing but Anthony's whisper to Connie when they parted for the night.

"Don't cry, my darling, when anything happens to papa and mamma you must come out to us."

In this wide separation these young ones learnt to affront and contemplate the issues of life and death, and to plan and prepare for them as we must all do later in years when amongst our household possessions we count many graves, and death has been in amongst us again and again, and turned half the empty chairs from the hearth to the wall.

The next morning rose with clouds and drizzling rain, and we rose with it, our hearts as heavy as the clouds. If only the sun would have shone,

it would have done a little to cheer us, but it could not penetrate the blackness, and by the time we had got breakfast over, the drizzle had increased to a sharp rattling storm. The ship in which the boys were to make their voyage was lying in the river off Gravesend, and it had been proposed that we should all go down to see them on board, but, at the last, mamma was prevailed on to stay at home with Ursula, and only papa, Connie, and I accompanied them.

We went from Blackwall in a river steamer with several other parties of emigrants and their friends, bound for the same destination as ourselves. The quietness of all these people was wonderful; perhaps, like mine, their throats ached and swelled with suppressed crying, but those who wept, wept silently, holding the hands of the companions from whom they were parting, perhaps for ever, in close, tender grasp. But I think I was touched with deepest pity for a man who marched solitary to and fro the deck, with his hands in his pockets and a cigar between his lips; for he had nobody to say good-bye to and nobody to be sorry for his going.

The drenching rain drove us below, but as soon as we came in sight of the ship every one rushed up the cabin stairs to look at her. We went on board and saw the boys' berths, and noted every little circumstance that would be pleasant to tell mamma when we got back home again; and, at last, there was a call of all strangers off, and the parting passed, and with a great cheer and the boys' faces looking at us through a blinding mist, we steamed back to London.

It was almost dark when we reached home, and mamma had been dreadfully anxious for our return, but she was cheered by our account of what we had seen and of how the boys had started in good spirits; and then we all conspired to say, like Bertie, that the world was not so very far round after all, and that in a few years' time they would be coming back again to see us.

"They're gone, poor fellows," said Ursula; "and I suppose it will be quick march with the rest of us very soon."

And, indeed, we all began to feel that it was now vain any longer to delay our own removal. A house agent at Redcross was therefore written

to, and terms were made for our having a four years' lease of a cottage there at a very moderate rent. It had always before been let furnished, but the owner agreed to remove his goods and put it into thorough repair on the chance of our becoming permanent tenants. Early in September, therefore, Miss Heywood quitted us for a new situation, and we took a last sorrowful leave of beautiful Roseberry.

## VI.

## A NEW HOME.

WHEN we first came to live at Redcross it was a bowery little spot, nearly a mile and a half from the rising town of Scarcliffe, but since that date, the latter place has increased so much by means of stucco terraces and marine villas that we are almost incorporated into its gayest suburb.

Our new home was, as nurse Bradshaw wofully expressed it, "a sad come down from Roseberry," but it was nevertheless a place to which a family that had seen better days might retire without any insufferable jar on its sensibilities. It was a little way beyond and above the village, and presented only a high dead wall towards the road with a door opening into the sunny south-sloping garden, which was bounded on the farther side

by a holly hedge and thick screen of shrubs and trees, and separated by a sunk fence from certain beautiful undulating meadows that went by the name of the Old Grove Fields. A rustic bridge and wicket gate led from the shady walk under the holly hedge to a footpath across these meadows, which was our shortest and pleasantest way to church. The house was Grove Cottage. It was a perfectly old-fashioned, unpretentious place, built of stone and thatched, but the walls were almost invisible behind the diamond trellis-work, thickly matted with roses, clematis, jessamine, honeysuckle, and the graceful falling clusters of crimson leaves of the Virginian creeper which quite hid one gable end of the roof. A wide porch with two seats under it sheltered the doorway, and on either side of the tile-paved entrance opened the parlours, each with a broad stone-mullioned window. They were rather low, but they were so sunny that the encroachment of the creepers outside upon the glass was an advantage rather than otherwise; and the light as it passed through the chequering branches had quite a softened and pictorial effect. The

offices were at the back and upstairs there were five sufficiently commodious bedrooms.

Nurse Bradshaw went down a fortnight before us, and with the help of the village carpenter and of a strong rough and ready country servant, had fitted the remnants of Roseberry luxury so advantageously to the several rooms, that when we arrived my first impression was one of entire admiration and delight. The drawing-room was extremely pretty, and the garden, looking out from its low windows, was a perfect nest of flowers and luxuriance. Mamma's bedroom was over it, and possessed all her dainty personal indispensables and the pictures that had decorated her walls at home. Ursula's room was the second best over the other parlour, and Connie and I agreed to share one at the back of the house, where we had nothing particularly agreeable but a view of the downs.

Nurse apologized for having given Ursula the preference both in choice of rooms and selection of furniture; indeed, we were put off with mismatched articles and odds and ends of everything, like nurse herself; for Connie had bidden her not



care about her and I had promised not to complain; a piece of forbearance which we had ceased to expect from Ursula. She had worn her martyr face all the way from town and was the only one amongst us who had not commended the results of nurse's labours at first sight; she entered the cottage in silence and permitted herself to be shown to her room as mute as if her lips were padlocked. She was in one of her blackest and most perverse moods, and hardly had nurse left Connie and myself to go and look after mamma, than she entered our room with an air of utter exhaustion, and looking round disconsolately, she exclaimed, while the sullen tears swelled in her eyes, "What a mean, sordid, poverty-stricken little place! I never dreamed it would be as bad as this."

Connie was dismayed; we had just been saying to each other that what we had lost in grandeur we had gained in pictorial effect, and that the prospect from our wide-open lattice window was worth anything.

"I am sure the house is damp and the thatch full of vermin," Ursula went on, in an exalted

voice; "when the walls are so overgrown, there are all sorts of creeping things in the rooms—I saw an earwig in my room just now and I hate earwigs! I know I shall never be able to settle. I had better write to Miss Heywood and ask her to find me a situation at once," and then she marched off, shutting the door noisily, having effected nothing but the very undesirable result of lowering our feelings of satisfaction.

I believe it was Epictetus who summed up the philosophy of life in the brief phrase, "Bear and forbear," and we seemed likely to have opportunities enough for its exercise; but we had made up our minds not to give way to repining thoughts, and to stave off dull melancholy which Ursula had left behind, we went out into the garden and inspected its beauties and usefulness until nurse Bradshaw called us in to tea; when we carried to papa a crimson rose from a standard tree as fine, if not finer, than anything we had ever grown at Roseberry. He was immensely pleased with it; it kept him talking and amused throughout the meal, and after tea, he and mamma turned out and loitered about the walks until

dusk, planning improvements and alterations, and as pleased and busy as children with a new toy.

It was necessary for various reasons that our family should consist of as few members as possible, and when we were settled, nurse Bradshaw herself offered to dispense with her rough and ready assistant. She said she could manage very well alone if the young ladies would take the books and ornaments under their own care; but when it came to be proved, she made the mortifying discovery that she had over-estimated the capabilities of one pair of hands, and was thankful for regular assistance from Connie and myself in her morning tasks. We soon became expert bed-makers and bread-makers and efficient upper housemaids, and Connie was a capital polisher of spoons and layer of a table, but Ursula did nothing.

“Rather than turn drudge at home I will go out as a governess,” said she, and from the hard diligence with which she applied to her studies it appeared, that she was, in good earnest, preparing herself for some such step. She worked with grammar and dictionaries, she drew, she

thumped the piano for hours together, and practised all her severe virtues with the greatest regularity. Connie's sense of justice revolted at this; though willing to do her share and more than her share of household tasks, she was impatient of Ursula's dignified isolation from our labours, and gave it as her opinion, in which nurse coincided, that she also ought to take a department to herself. I made a point of never interfering with Ursula myself; I would rather have done her share of work twice over than have asked her to do it; but Connie was under no such restraint, and one morning when we were going to be especially busy, she said to her—"Ursula, I wish you would charge yourself with the dusting of the books and of the little things in the drawing-room."

"Has not nurse time to do them? I promise you I have no taste for amateur housemaiding," replied she tartly.

"Nurse has not time for everything. Doris and I always make our own bed and do our room from one end to the other, besides dusting mamma's and yours and both parlours."

"I don't want you to dust my room," said Ursula reddening; "keep out of it for the future."

"Then you must do it yourself. Nurse has only one pair of hands, and as we take a regular part in helping her, I think you might attend to the drawing-room tables and the flower-vases."

"Well, that is enough; you need say no more about it. It will end by my going out, I see," and so, with her customary threat, Ursula closed the discussion.

The next morning, however, she did her own room thoroughly and dusted both parlours; and papa having remarked as he looked out of the window, that the weeds in the garden were almost getting ahead of the flowers since the warm showers that had lately fallen, nothing would serve her but going out in the full heat of the day to hoe them up; she stayed in the blazing sun a couple of hours and came in just before dinner in a violent heat and a most acrid temper.

"As well be a slave at once as work like this!" said she entering the drawing-room where Connie

and I were taking our rest, after our tasks in the domestic regions were accomplished. "Here you sit, in white-handed state, never caring a straw what becomes of me! I have been on my feet ever since I got out of my bed this morning, and I declare I am ready to drop."

"You need not make a martyr of yourself, Ursula," said Connie quite unmoved by her pathetic voice. "You might have been drawing at your Turk's head for an hour or two if you had chosen. Nurse wanted you to let the weeds alone. Hollis is coming to-morrow to mow the lawn, and he would have hoed them up in a quarter the time."

"That is hard! First I am set to work and then I am told, when I am half dead, that I have done no good."

"I did not say that, Ursula."

"But you *meant* it. Oh! what a miserable, *miserable* thing it is to be poor!"

"You are making the worst of it, Ursula, but I wish you would not speak so loud; mamma is in her room and she will hear you," I ventured to say, on which she turned sharply round,



exclaiming in a more vehement, high-pitched tone than before: "Now don't *you* bemoralize me, Doris, for I won't bear it. I will not stay at home to be treated like this, I am determined. I shall look through the advertisements in *The Times* to-night to see if there is anything likely to suit me."

We neither of us attempted to argue against her resolve—perhaps we thought we should be more peaceful at home if she did carry her severe virtues into another sphere.



## VII.

## NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

THE weather was fortunately fine for more than a month after our arrival at Redcross, and September was a peculiarly beautiful season for its scenery, so that we had grown in a measure accustomed to our new home and almost fond of it, before weary, wet, winterly days arrived to make us prisoners indoors and throw us back on our own resources.

We had been nearly three months at Grove Cottage before any one called upon us. Arriving in the height of the gay season when many of the residents were absent, we were lost in the crowd of strangers until the growing chill of November dispersed them. We had not wanted for amusement or occupation, and to me the absolute seclusion was an unspeakable rest and

comfort; but as the days became dull or stormy Ursula bemoaned it, and declared more strenuously than ever that if this state of isolation was to be perpetual, she should make haste to deliver herself from it by taking a situation. Connie too, with the natural instincts of her age, began to speculate upon the young folks whom we met in the fields, on the downs, on the shore, and to say whose appearance made her long for their acquaintance; but they came and went in perpetual relays, and not until the grey mists of late autumn hung amongst the trees did we perceive who were the permanent society of Redcross. In the dim little parish church by that time we had grown familiar with certain faces which afterwards became faces of friends, and during the first week of December we were called upon by the rector and his wife.

It was a drizzling, overcast day, I remember, towards four o'clock of the afternoon, and we were all together in the drawing-room; Ursula still hard at work on her Turk's head, taking advantage of the last quarter of an hour's daylight by the window, while the rest of us were

clustered round the fire in the quiet enjoyment of blindman's holiday. The loud knock at the door startled papa out of a doze and roused us all; we had become so used to our undisturbed privacy that I fancy this peremptory announcement of the advent of a visitor was by most of us regarded as an unwelcome intrusion; but Ursula exclaimed in a loud whisper, "Here is somebody at last, thank heaven!" and the next moment nurse Bradshaw announced, "Mr. and Mrs. Maurice."

They were rather diffident and nervous, as it appeared to me, on their entrance; possibly they had informed themselves of the circumstances of their new parishioners and were in doubt as to whether or no their visit might prove acceptable. But mamma made room for Mrs. Maurice on the couch beside her, and they soon fell into friendly conversation, while the rector and papa got upon public affairs, and discovered, apparently, that a wide difference of opinion lay between them on most subjects.

Ursula was not long before she introduced herself into the conversation between mamma and

Mrs. Maurice, which had turned upon the district clothing club, the schools and various other matters of parish business; she assumed a grave interest in it all, asked questions, made suggestions, and offered opinions in her most civil and sensible way, by degrees drawing Mr. Maurice's attention also upon herself; and finally quite taking the lead, and conveying an impression to the strangers that in this seriously-disposed, practical young woman they would find an efficient assistant in all their benevolent labours and projects. They were evidently much pleased with her, and stayed talking a long hour, passing from one topic to another quite easily and naturally, until we found them speaking to us with kind condolence, as to people under a pressure of recent calamity; alluding to the sweet uses of adversity, the duty of resignation and the simple pleasures of a country life and middle station.

They took their leave, expressing a hope that they should soon have the pleasure of seeing us again, and hardly had the door closed upon them than Ursula exclaimed in a tone of eager gratulation,—

"I am glad we looked so cosy and comfortable when those people came! I should say they were thoroughly surprised. Some persons have such queer ideas about those who have been in any way engaged in trade; but they would see with half a glance that whatever our misfortunes, we have retained the tastes and habits of a class as refined and cultivated as their own. It was lucky I dressed up all the vases with fresh ferns and flowers this morning, and I am quite thankful I was at my easel. First impressions are everything with new acquaintance."

We let Ursula plume herself to her heart's content; but in talking over what had passed during the visit when papa and mamma were not there, she permitted herself to express some of those sentiments which she always kept for home and private consumption. Connie rather mischievously asked whether she meant to take any practical part in those parish duties, about which she had professed to feel so lively an interest.

"I did not profess any interest at all," was her unhesitating reply. "I said no more than it was perfectly natural and proper to say, and

if that dowdy body of a clergyman's wife considers me pledged to work at her Jews' basket or Dorcas meetings she will find herself very much mistaken. I shall not join any village union for any purpose whatever. It is all very well for some women to band themselves together in pious little clubs for the furtherance of pious little objects, but it would not suit me."

It was not always safe to take Ursula at her word; it was difficult to say how she might act when she came to be put to the proof. I had my private opinion, however, that such sentiments as she had now vented would not go beyond ourselves, and that if her help were sought and made of sufficient importance she would be ready and willing to give it for any object; for she had immense activity and the utmost perseverance in whatever she set her hands to do. What she desired to repudiate was any notion that she was *set* to work.

"You will allow yourself to be thrust into a groove at once," she said to me, "but I prefer to be useful and charitable either in my own way or in none;" and what she desired to gain



was an admission into the best society Redcross afforded; as she had so easily adapted her conversation to what she felt was the tone of our first visitors, so it was tolerably certain that to assure the attainment of her wishes she would continue to act and speak what seemed most expedient, though she might indemnify herself at home by such little splenetic spurts as that in which she had indulged after the rector and his wife were gone. One could not call Ursula hypocritical, exactly, but she had much of that quality which nurse Bradshaw denominated "shiftiness," and she veered and trimmed with the prevalent wind of self-interest as much or more than any other person whom I have ever known. It was a weakness in her character which had given Miss Heywood infinite solicitude and care, but it had proved quite beyond her power permanently to correct.



## VIII.

## A SERIOUS TEA-PARTY.

A FEW days after Mr. and Mrs. Maurice had called upon us, papa, mamma and Ursula returned their visit and made the acquaintance of the rector's two daughters, whom we knew by sight as plain, serviceable young women, sitting at church amongst the school children. Ursula described them to us on her return home as "all very well, but not at all in her way;" she, however, predicted that I should like them, especially the elder, and during Christmas week an invitation to drink tea at the rectory gave me an opportunity of judging for myself.

The note did not mention how many or which of us would be expected, but Ursula immediately laid it down as a rule that two of a family were sufficient, and as papa and mamma had, from the

first, decided that they should never go out at all, the lot fell upon herself and me. Connie looked greatly disappointed, but she would not listen to any proposal of my place being resigned to her; and Ursula declared, rather than that three of us should go, she would stay at home herself; an idea not to be entertained for a moment.

She said she knew it would be a prosy affair, but she was nevertheless all impatience for it; she was anxious to see what were our chances of society in Redcross, and it gratified her that our first appearance should be made in so unquestionable a place as the rectory drawing-room.

“Introduced there,” said she, “nobody will be afraid of taking us by the hand.”

She was also very solicitous about our dress and speculated twenty times a day on what might be the general evening style of attire in such a quiet village. She possessed some taste and ingenuity of contrivance upon her diminished allowance, and, being skilful with her needle, managed to have much more variety than Connie or myself, who, in shaping our coats to our fortunes, were obliged to be content with the severest simplicity.

She said that from the appearance of Mrs. Maurice and her daughters, she should conjecture that neutral tints and general limpness were the most orthodox, but she did not feel bound to disfigure herself to propitiate anybody; and so she should wear her blue silk and black lace with short sleeves, certainly she should wear short sleeves; whatever other people did was of no importance to her. I could not, for my part, look on this visit as of any peculiar moment, neither did I anticipate that any one would be either impressed or disquieted by the fashion of our clothes. I would rather have stayed at home and have let Connie go; but Ursula, it is true, had all her hopes and experience before her, and I had done with the chief part of mine, which was, perhaps, the root of the difference.

We were very late in reaching the rectory; the invitation had been for six, which Ursula said of course meant *seven*; and as she refused to set off until the hour had struck, we had the satisfaction of entering the drawing-room after everybody else was assembled and after tea had been kept waiting an hour. Mr. Maurice said

good-humouredly as he received us, "If you young ladies are going to import such fashionable practices as these amongst us, I think my wife must bid you for five o'clock when she wants you at six;" and then he rang the bell and said to the servant who answered it, "Tea immediately."

Mrs. Maurice came forward and whispered reprovingly to Ursula, "I thought you were a punctual, methodical person, my dear;" to which Ursula replied that she would behave better another time, and then the daughters shook hands with us, and we sat down without being introduced to any of the other guests, who numbered about a dozen besides ourselves. We were already familiar with most of their faces by seeing them so often at church, and as they afterwards formed a principal part of our society, I shall proceed by describing them. They were the serious body in Redcross, or, as I afterwards heard them denominated, the T. P. party.

First there was Mrs. Peacocke, wife of the parish doctor, who had all the effect of a gorgeous painted window against the wall where she sat at

church, and who now kept Ursula in countenance by being in very full dress; there was Mrs. Braithwaite, a childless young widow, who also served the purposes of ecclesiastical ornament, and glowed and glittered in her pew like a newly blazoned escutcheon; there was Miss Pegge Burnell, a very rich deformed old lady, who resided at the Priory and owned nearly all the property about Redcross; she now sat in a screened chair, looking very much like a cross poll parrot in its cage, eyeing myself and Ursula as strangers with lynx-eyed severity. *She* was not reputed pious, but she had a passion for society and was always invited wherever a few persons congregated together for social purposes. There was Miss Cranmer, a fine-looking woman of thirty or thereabouts; and there was Miss Theodora Bousfield, who might own to half a dozen years more, and who had been a very fascinating and ample beauty in her day; she seemed yet to cultivate the social graces with success and looked like a choice flower which had undergone transplantation from fashionable life, but had borne it extremely well. There

were also two Miss Layels, who appeared to be nearly as great strangers as ourselves; one a pretty, fair woman with flowing ringlets, the other small, dark and unnoticeable; and two Miss Foxleys from Scarcliffe, limp and dreary people.

The gentlemen, as is usual at country tea-parties, were much fewer than the ladies. Besides the rector and his son Charles, a curly-headed young collegian, there were only four—Mr. Peacocke, the doctor, who was very short and very fat, who rolled in his chair, talked and laughed loud, and defeated all his smart little wife's labours to trim and pare him according to her own notions of gentility; Mr. Stewart, the curate, a hard-working man engaged to Miss Martha Maurice; Mr. Foxley, a clergyman in Scarcliffe, a thick-limbed, middle-aged bachelor, with a round, shining bald head, a fleshy white face all in folds about the jaws and chin, and small pale eyes, irresistibly suggestive of puss; and lastly, there was Mr. Barstow, a perfect figure of fun, the oddest little man I ever saw in my life; very slender and buttoned up tight in a velvet-collared coat; his head inclined to the left shoulder



and a curl of a highly lackered wig brought round to shade what looked singularly like a glass eye; he wore a moustache and a chin tuft and stood about the room in attitudes. He bore in Redcross the sobriquet of the "Fortuner," having recently come into possession of a considerable estate in the neighbourhood as heir-at-law to a very distant relative who had died intestate. He was said to have been a barber in London, and if that were correct his eccentricities in hair were accounted for.

Rather to my amusement, without any introduction, he attached himself to my sister Ursula, than whom no one could possibly have been less tolerant of his peculiarities; and though she changed her seat several times in the course of the evening she never quite succeeded in getting rid of him. After tea had been disposed of, I found myself near Miss Pegge Burnell, with Mr. Peacocke at my elbow; and while thus arranged, Mrs. Maurice brought up Mr. Foxley to the screened chair and introduced him, adding in a whisper perfectly audible to the subject of it, "A most devout, right-headed and excellent



man, Miss Pegge Burnell, whose delightful conversation I am sure you will be able to appreciate ;” with which compliment, cutting both ways, she smiled on them benignly and left them to improve their acquaintance. Miss Pegge Burnell looked very sour over it, and placed where I was, it was impossible to avoid hearing the reason.

Mr. Foxley was an unctuous person whose talk was as a stream of treacle, so thickly sweet and slow gliding. His style and manner were of the familiar, and in the course of a very few sentences, the old lady was his “dear friend,” much to her annoyance, if the expression of her countenance might be trusted. No doubt he knew Miss Pegge Burnell’s fame and fortunes, and thought her one worthy of all his eloquence ; for he soon launched himself into a profound polemical treatise, emphasizing every proposition with a pudgy forefinger on his square right knee, and going on long, slow, untiring, until his victim suddenly looked up in his stolid visage with a wicked twinkle of mockery in her vivid eyes ; when he all at once lost the thread of his argument and could not, for confusion, catch it again.

Miss Pegge Burnell's mischievous glance had been provoked by an incautious whisper and laugh behind her from Mr. Peacocke, "Do you see how enthusiastically Mr. Foxley is labouring for the conversion of the heathen," addressed to no one in particular, but duly appreciated by Mrs. Braithwaite and Miss Theodora Bousfield, who heard it as well as myself. Mr. Foxley's white face became warmly suffused, and as Miss Pegge Burnell turned round to the little doctor and said, "Thank you for a happy deliverance," he, with a cowardice unworthy of so high a cause, removed himself from the vicinity of female ridicule and retreated to the hearthrug, where he caught the curate by the button and held him there, expatiating on vexed points of church discipline and abstruse matters of faith and doctrine while a select circle gathered round him to listen and applaud.

Then he was in his glory. Mrs. Peacocke, whose love of finery was at open variance with her professed evangelical principles, stood gazing up at him with intense appreciation, continually circulating little notes of admiration amongst the

company that might have undermined the meekness of Moses. Mrs. Maurice was less commendatory; perhaps she did not like the innovation at all, or perhaps she thought that her own husband might have occupied the hearthrug more profitably; but Mr. Foxley's remorseless powers of holding forth had long established him as special preacher at every tea-party he frequented within a circuit of five miles round his parish. But, at length, he gave utterance to a sentiment which admitted of a little friendly controversy, and then was the time for the rector to strike in with a doubt and a demur, which he did with apostolic warmth and eagerness of tone. While they were in the heat of it, Mr. Peacocke slipped into a chair by Miss Pegge Burnell and asked her which of the parsons she backed; and presently he turned round to Miss Theodora Bousfield and entreated her to give them a little music. "Restore harmony, you know," said he significantly, for the voices of the controversialists were rapidly rising above the pitch of friendly argument.

It was wonderful to see with what eagerness his

suggestion was seized upon by all the audience, which swiftly melted away from the pulpit of eloquence and re-congealed round the piano. Probably Miss Theodora Bousfield's claim to be a member of the serious party in Redcross rested mainly, if not wholly, on the fact of her playing the organ in church ; and as she always selected her music to suit her company, on this occasion she had come provided with a choice of hymns which she sang beautifully ; being assisted, more or less out of tune, by nearly everybody else, until Miss Pegge Burnell cried out, "Don't give us any more of those methodistical things, Miss Theo ! let us have a fine rousing tune, such as they play at the opera."

The muscles of many faces relaxed during the pause of awful silence which followed this request, and then Miss Theodora complied, to most people's undissembled satisfaction ; Mr. Peacocke and myself at once drew near her to listen.

"Terrible body, Miss Pegge Burnell," whispered the doctor in my ear ; "but enormously rich ; one foot in the grave, but her whole heart in the world, bless her ! Our worthy hostess has undertaken her

conversion—perhaps she has an eye to the poor old soul's money as well—but she won't get any of it. Miss Pegge has left it all to found a Society for the Suppression of Fools—she told me so herself.”

I thought I should like to have the pleasure of the queer old lady's acquaintance, and when Miss Theodora Bousfield's song was done, Mr. Peacocke said he thought he could manage it for me, and went off on tiptoe to clear the way, Miss Pegge Burnell being far too formidable a person to be approached without preliminaries. I then saw her advance her head round one side of her fenced chair and heard her say in reference to myself, “She does not look quite such a formal idiot as her sister with the sharp nose—yes, you may bring her; but hark, doctor, I won't have her coming about the Priory with any evangelizing designs, tell her that first, d'ye hear?”

Mr. Peacocke bent his head and gave a whispered explanation which caused her to grin with delight; she then beckoned me to approach, received me with two wags of her turban, and stretched out a withered claw to appoint me to a

vacant chair beside her; after which she looked me over with unwinking scrutiny for the space of a minute, and then asked how much a yard I had given for the material of which my dress was composed. Her curiosity on that point being satisfied, she felt its quality and remarked; "I don't like your stiff rustling silks myself; give me a satin that can be drawn through a ring;" stroking the soft glossy sheen of her own raiment. "I hate to hear a parcel of women fussing and clattering round a room like a family of hens in full cluck; they should be seen and not heard, as I tell them; but I might as well speak to a stone wall. Scarcely one in ten seems to have any idea in what true grace and loveliness consist. Look at Mrs. Peacocke with her lean, impertinent little shoulders stuck a quarter of a yard out of her gown; if you were to take her by the nape of her neck and shake her you would shake her out of it altogether. Theodora Bousfield is the best dresser I know; she is perfectly accomplished in the art of simplicity, and oh! what an art that is!'

This was not the style of conversation I had anticipated from this crooked old woman who had



left her money to found a Society for the Suppression of Fools, and whose face was one parchmenty map of fine wrinkles with the framework so sharply defined as irresistibly to suggest the date when Miss Pegge Burnell would wear nothing but her bones. "Look what frights some of these professing Christians are;" she went on; "is it not enough to scare young people out of the right way to see what tasteless dowdies are tramping along it? their limp petticoats hampering their feet, their backs up, their chins poking, and their eyes either shut or looking as slyly demure as cats after cream. If I could be young and pretty again I would not make such a guy of myself for twenty kingdoms of heaven."

I could not help contemplating the irreverent old lady with sheer amaze—*pretty!* could Miss Pegge Burnell have ever been *pretty*, or did only the inextinguishable vanity of her sex lead her to imply it for the sake of sentiment? I inclined to the latter conclusion, for there was no single trace of beauty left on her quaint, ancient visage, and grace she could surely have had none with such a distorted form. She was gifted with a



deep, unmodulated voice, in which she went on growling her original observations until the music ceased, and I became aware that they must be distinctly audible throughout the room, which had suddenly become silent in every other quarter; and looking round, I perceived Mrs. Maurice shaking a monitory forefinger at the screened chair, while Mr. Foxley, drawn up before the centre table with a pair of candles and a large Bible before him, was clearing his throat and sucking lozenges as a prelude to exposition.

Before beginning, he promenaded his eyes from face to face, reducing each to a formal look of attention, hemmed sonorously, and then read out one of the most beautiful of the New Testament parables, the meaning of which is obvious to a child's understanding and capable only of being diluted and darkened by a superfluous haze of explanations. Nevertheless Mr. Foxley improved it by a discourse of five-and-twenty minutes—a discourse of ungrammatical trivialities not bearing on the text in the slightest manner. The parable was the great lesson of universal charity which he turned into a bigoted denunciation of all

Roman Catholics; for the negro, the Mahomedan, the mild Hindoo, the cannibal islander, he had a tender pity and sympathy, but for the idolatrous papist he had nothing but hatred, malice, and uncharitableness. I cannot remember whenever I had felt so irritated before; but throughout his drivel, drawl, and whine he sustained no interruption save once, when an irrepressible snarl issued from the depths of Miss Pegge Burnell's chair of, "Oh! somebody, for mercy's sake, put him down, will you?" to which, of course, all were discreetly deaf, only a stifled titter from my sister Ursula testifying to any appreciation of the absurdity of the scene. He wound up his discourse with some abruptness, and kneeling down with his eyes shut, delivered a long-winded discursive prayer with a special clause in favour of the offender, which was broken in upon by the hasty opening and closing of the door; this suggested that supper must be ready, and made some people dreadfully impatient of the prolongation of Mr. Foxley's petition. When he finally permitted us to rise from our knees it was but too evident that most of us had been

yawning and rubbing our eyes for ever so long ; and the poor little Fortuner in his agonies of weariness had pushed his wig awry, so that the curl meant to shroud the mystery of his left eye was now hanging below his ear.

The company was then marshalled in to supper, Mr. Peacocke offering his arm to Miss Pegge Burnell, who instantly gave vent to her temper by a perfectly distinct exclamation of, “ Will anybody try to make me believe that the Deity is gratified by that pointless exposition and snuffling prayer while we are hungering for our suppers ? Thomas Foxley is not worshipping God but himself when he turns private drawing-rooms into conventicles, and prays such spiteful nonsense as he prayed to-night. Talking about the filthy flesh, indeed, and ordering us all to mortify it ; mark him when it comes to the eating and see how he pampers his own. If there’s trifle, only observe how he wallows in it, and his example will go a long way further in disgusting us than a volume of precepts.”

There was a trifle, and the dish being placed before me, I had the pleasure of helping Mr.

Foxley thrice to that dainty, which he absorbed in a slow, ruminative way until his countenance shone again with carnal enjoyment; he had previously acquitted himself well towards the fowls and ham, and had not done amiss in the matter of apricot tartlets; neither did he afterwards fail as regarded pound-cake, biscuits, filberts and candied fruits, and I am sure our host and hostess had the sincerest pleasure in seeing how he appreciated their hospitality.

The conversation was chiefly between neighbours; and Miss Pegge Burnell, who was one of mine, did not fail of topics for her delightful observations. Towards the end of supper her attention was attracted to the dark little Miss Layel, and she asked me if I knew who the sisters were. I said, no, I now met all the guests present for the first time, on which she replied,—

“ They are tenants of mine, but I never saw them before. I rather like the brown little phiz, it is so sagacious and quizzical, but the other looks too much of the languishing maiden for me—however, I must make their acquaintance.”

Our rising from the supper-table appeared to be the signal for a general dispersion; all the ladies trooped upstairs to put on cloaks and shawls except the two Miss Layels who had left theirs in the hall. As I followed last in the file, I saw them put them on, receive a lighted lantern from one of the servants and disappear out at the front door, so that when Miss Pegge Burnell looked round amongst us to find them and ask for her introduction, they were gone. She was obliged to content herself, therefore, with inquiring of Miss Maurice, who had accompanied us upstairs, who they were. But Miss Maurice had little information to give.

“They told me they had taken your Ivy Cottage for a year,” said she, “and that Miss Kitty—that is, the fair one with curls—wished to get some teaching; I understood that the other had been a governess too. They appear to be young women of ladylike tastes, but not well off; so mamma asked them to come here this evening; she thought it might be a little amusement for them, poor things!”

“By the by, my dear, don’t let your mother

ask *me* again when you are going to have that angelical Mr. Foxley, for I won't meet him. He absolutely dared to pray for me loud out, the impudent fellow," said Miss Pegge Burnell with much irritation. Fortunately the maiden sisters of the gentleman alluded to had been carried by our hostess to another room to wrap up previous to their departure, but the old lady did not ascertain the fact until she had expressed her feelings, when she glanced round in some alarm.

"I know he is not a favourite of yours," replied Miss Maurice, apologetically: "he wants tact, but I do believe he has good intentions."

"Good intentions, my dear, are the most mischievous things I know; it is not without reason they have become the proverbial pavement of hell. They have done me harm to-night. I don't know when I have felt so wicked!" and pulling a large brown silk calash over her turban, Miss Pegge Burnell discharged at us collectively an angry nod and hobbled off on Miss Maurice's arm to her carriage. When she was out of sight and hearing, Mrs. Peacocke shook her head



dolorously, and remarked how awful it was to see a woman at her age in such an impenitent state, but as the observation failed to elicit any return personality, she simpered a very civil circular "good-night," and disappeared to join her husband, who had called out twice already from the foot of the stairs, "Now, Jane Hannah, are you ready?"

As my sister Ursula and I were crossing the grove fields homewards, she betrayed with some bitterness how Miss Maurice's words "poor things," with reference to the Miss Layels, had stuck in her memory. "I hate patronage!" said she. "*Poor things!* I daresay Mrs. Maurice said the same of us—let them come to tea, it will be a little amusement for them, *poor things!* And it was a little amusement; it was as good as a play for once. Miss Pegge Burnell and Mr. Foxley were most deliciously farcical, and as for the Fortuner, he is comedy incarnate! But I hope we have not dug down yet into the best strata of Redcross society, for it would be an insupportable bore if every party we went to turned out a-preaching."



“Honour to whom honour is due,” said I; “the Maurices are genuine, good, pious, kind people.”

“I don’t say a word against them, only they should have added to their note of invitation, ‘Sermon and Prayer before supper,’ and then we might have gone in morning costume and suitable temper. As it was, being taken by surprise, I could not prevent the most ridiculous thoughts coursing through my mind. I don’t remember ever before being inclined to mock and scoff at holy things as I did while Mr. Foxley was holding forth against the pomps and vanities; I am persuaded that the interests of true religion would be much better served by the abolition of that gentleman than by his encouragement. And as for that stuck-up little pharisee, Mrs. Peacocke, she is perfectly odious—canting and grimacing and, if I am not very much mistaken, with as stern and selfish a heart in her bosom as ever beat visibly under an insufficiency of tucker. How can her husband let her go out so dressed—or rather undressed? and she a woman of such obvious pious pretensions. I am sure I don’t

care if not a single one of all the people we have met to-night calls upon us ; I shall wait a short time longer to see if our prospects improve, and then, if they don't, I shall certainly take a situation."

## IX.

## A PERSONAGE.

BUT the following morning Mr. and Mrs. Peacocke honoured us with a visit, during which the conversation turned naturally upon the previous evening's entertainment. Ursula was always fond of acquiring personal information about her acquaintance, and keen as was her distaste for the doctor's affected little wife, she did not hesitate to make use of her as a fountain of village intelligence,—not, perhaps, taking into consideration how the intelligence might be vitiated which was drawn from such a source.

Mrs. Peacocke seemed by no means displeased at being referred to, and her sanctimonious little visage, set off by a garlanded bonnet from the shop of the showiest milliner in Scarcliffe, beamed round upon us all the most complacent patronage. She gave her views of Miss Pegge Burnell, which

were far from complimentary; and of the Fortuner, which were surprisingly flattering. She informed us that Miss Theodora Bousfield was the daughter of Dr. Bousfield, professor of music, and that she herself gave lessons in singing on very high terms. Miss Cranmer, she said, was a person of high cultivation who had lived in the best society both at home and abroad, and who appeared to know the genealogy and private history of everybody who was anybody either at Redcross or elsewhere. Mrs. Braithwaite she had *heard*, but would not like it to be repeated on her authority, was the widow of a wealthy London draper.

“For some people think so meanly of trade, you know,” she added with her cautious, confidential simper. “I am above such poor pride myself; but you will not let it go any further, for it *may* be only a calumny, only a *mistake*, you know.”

Ursula’s expression of countenance was worth observing at this moment, but she kept a tight hold over herself, and only asked rather abruptly if Mrs. Peacocke was acquainted with the Layels.

"I know them just to speak to and that is all," was her reply. "One or the other of them generally attends our Dorcas meetings, but I have not felt it necessary to *call* upon them. They are in poor circumstances, and I am given to understand, desire pupils to teach ; but I am sure I should not like to entrust girls of mine to Miss Layel's charge."

"Why not?" inquired Ursula.

"I met her several times during the autumn carrying quite a heavy basket of mould—of *earth*, you know—and she did not appear in the least discomposed. She said she wanted it for her plants, and the soil in the borders at her cottage was too stiff for fuchsias and geraniums, so she had fetched that from the Avonmore woods. It was ignorance ; I am sure she did not know there was anything singular in her walking about the country with a basket and trowel,—or, perhaps, if she did she would have done it all the same. I believe she sets up for an original."

"No, no, Jane Hannah," interposed the little doctor in a tone of good-humoured deprecation ; "she is a working bee, and I have a sincere

respect for her. If she sets up for anything it is for a philosophress. I thought it quite pleasant to hear her say that she enjoyed every innocent pleasure she could lay her hands on and her patch of garden especially. You ladies would not be troubled with so many fantastical ailments if you would cultivate cheerfulness on Miss Layel's principle. What was it she remarked about happiness, my dear?"

"Oh, she said there was great waste of happiness in the world for want of people having courage to be happy in their own way; but there was nothing particularly wise in *that*, that I can see. It was only a lame defence for her own eccentricities and her assertion of her right and resolution to please herself, however she might outrage public opinion."

At these strong words papa looked up and wished to know who was the intrepid little woman that dared do that in so small a community as Redcross. On being told it was a Miss Layel, he said he once knew a family of Layels in London—people in the law.

Mrs. Peacocke figuratively pricked up her ears

with curiosity to hear more, and said with a view of eliciting some further information that the Christian names of the sisters were Katherine and Janet.

“Poor Kitty Layel!” said mamma interested. “Yes, papa, these girls must be the daughters of our old friend who was so unfortunate.”

“Then their antecedents are respectable?” said Mrs. Peacocke; “I am glad to hear it. I saw they had been fairly educated. But how was their father unfortunate—not in a way to disgrace them, I trust?”

“No, ma’am,” replied papa tartly, “not in a way to disgrace anybody. The young women are to be pitied, but not avoided; I lost sight of him some years ago, and now I suppose he is dead and his children are left unprovided for—nothing singular in that for the children of professional men.”

“He ought to have insured his life; the neglect of that precaution by persons with a family, whose income expires at their death, is absolutely *immoral*,” said Mrs. Peacocke, glancing indignantly at her husband. “If Mr. Layel was



unfortunate it was most likely his own fault, arising out of the same carelessness or wilfulness which caused him to leave undone that very obvious and necessary duty to his children. Whenever I hear of a family being plunged into poverty, I always feel that blame must be somewhere. Troubles do not come of themselves, you know, and those who are prudent get on and maintain a position in the world. I have no sympathy whatever with those who are commonly called unfortunate, for I was never applied to for relief by any of them that I failed to trace home their calamities to their own misconduct."

Mamma sighed, and papa said sarcastically,—

"It is a well-known fact that the virtuous are always in prosperity."

"I would not go quite so far as to say *that*," returned Mrs. Peacocke, smiling with invincible complacency; "for every rule has its exception. However, these young women are not responsible for the errors of their father, but we may regret for their own sake, that since they have confessedly their bread to earn they should make themselves in any way conspicuous."

“What have they done besides carrying that basket of mould?” asked Ursula.

Mrs. Peacocke was less ready with particulars than with generalizations; she said she had no special accusation to bring against Miss Layel or her sister; she really knew very little about them and she had no intention of cultivating their acquaintance further.

“If you do not call upon them, Jane Hannah, I shall,” announced the little doctor cheerfully; “they are very nice, modest, unpretending young women, but sensibly as they live, they *must* be ill or have an accident some day, and I cannot afford to put a patient in mine enemy’s pocket.”

“I am sure you will not call upon them, John,” responded his wife with great decision.

He laughed, gave papa a comical, intelligent glance, and jumped up from his seat saying,—

“This is not a visit, but a visitation, my dear. Give the young ladies your message, and let us be going.”

“That is well thought on,” returned she, recovering her careful smile and shaking out her flounces. “Will you kindly waive the ceremony

of a return visit and join our little Dorcas society at my house to-morrow afternoon at three o'clock. I will take no denial, Miss Ursula, you *must* come."

Ursula received the peremptory invitation in lofty silence, and when Mr. Peacocke and his wife were gone, she ambled two or three times the length of the room, spreading her skirts abroad and mincing her steps as if she were about to break into a dance like our patronizing new acquaintance; but after a few turns of this initiative exercise, she stopped short and exclaimed with a red and angry face,—

"*Must to me! Must go to her Dorcas meeting, indeed; little, conceited, fan-tailed pigeon!* I shall do nothing of the kind. I can accommodate myself to most people, but her insufferable airs of patronage positively make me sick. And mind this, Doris, I forbid you to make any excuse for me. If she asks why I am not there to-morrow, you are to tell her roundly I would not come."

"She is immense fun, I think," said Connie; "I liked to watch how she was taking a stealthy

inventory of all the contents of the room and appraising the cost of our dresses while she was turning her careful little periods."

"I do not think I ever saw a more artificial person; she is like a mosaic doll," added Ursula. "There is far more flourish than fact about her, that is sure. Then her voice, her accent! Take my word for it if that woman ever opens her mouth and ventures to be natural she must be vulgar."

"To my mind the most homely provincial accent would be less vulgar than her clipped and mincing speech," said I.

"Come, come, girls, enough of this backbiting," interposed papa; "if the woman was born a fool, can she help it? You take too much exception to the works of Providence;" and our criticism having received its full complement ceased.

## X.

## A VILLAGE DORCAS MEETING.

AFTER all Ursula's uncompromising declarations that nothing should induce her to attend Mrs. Peacocke's Dorcas meeting, I was rather astonished the next day when she followed Connie and myself upstairs after dinner and said she thought she would go.

"You might as well," replied Connie, who saw she only waited for a little persuasion; and it ended by our getting ready at once.

When we returned to the drawing-room to supply ourselves with the needful tools, papa looked up from his newspaper and remarked mischievously,—

"So you have repented, Ursie, and are going to play at Dorcas after all, are you?"

"I am going to walk down the road with my"

sisters and I shall make up my mind on the way," was her reply.

But I think Ursula's mind was made up already, for, of course, she went in with us, and, of course, she received Mrs. Peacocke's welcome with the utmost ease and amiability; and that lady, who was capable of appreciating her powers as a needlewoman, quickly set her to work on a blue striped shirt. She said she was glad to see three of us, for they were short of hands that afternoon in the unavoidable absence of some of the members; but the room appeared to me very full, and amongst the industrious sisterhood I perceived many more strange faces than faces that I knew.

This Dorcas Society's affairs were, as I learnt that day, managed by twelve committee ladies with Mrs. Maurice for their president, and each lady was bound in turn to receive the meeting in her best parlour and comfort it with coffee and biscuits. There was a great difference, my neighbour Miss Cranmer informed me, in the quantity of the one and the quality of the other as dispensed at the various ladies' houses. Some



gave genuine Mocha and sweet fancy biscuits mixed at fifteenpence the pound; but Mrs. Peacocke only gave indifferent chicory boiled, and those dry, chaffy, soda biscuits which always taste of deal box; but then she and the other ladies who kept her economy in countenance made up for it by superior gentility and thinner china. Mrs. Braithwaite gave the best biscuits, but she was said to make them with her own hands, and so, as Miss Cranmer sapiently observed, "they cost her nothing and were always crisp, fresh, and abundant:" but about the *china*, Mrs. Braithwaite possessed the very finest foreign.

For two hours after our arrival any conversation had to be carried on at broken intervals and in whispers, for an uninteresting volume of missionary travels was then in course of being read aloud, not much, I fear, to the edification of any of the company; but it was an institution that such works only should be admitted for the society's intellectual refreshment, and they were endured, save by a very small minority, with the most exemplary patience. At five o'clock, however, an interlude of twenty minutes was allowed



for rest, and while we were discontentedly refreshing ourselves with the blue-milked cups of chicory and the chaff biscuits, talk was indulged in without any shaking of heads or uplifting of warning forefingers, such as I had previously observed directed to remote corners where a little whispered surreptitious gossip was being transacted. I had now an opportunity of speaking to Miss Pegge Burnell, who, for any work she had done, might just as well have been at home—better, perhaps, for she was a most restless mortal and would talk at improper seasons; and not being able to modulate her voice to the discreet undertone in which alone disagreeable things ought to be said, she must have been the cause of much dissembled wrath and confusion. Here are some of her delightful remarks, “Over-dressed woman that Mrs. Braithwaite is! Why does she not wear a cap? Try as she will she cannot hide that she is close upon fifty.” “There is a spot on Arabella Brown’s nose again—I am not going to call them Brown-Standon, not I! Was not old Brown’s name good enough for his son that he must tag his mother’s to it? for

distinction's sake forsooth!" "Who cares about the Quishamanco tribes? the book is dull. What do they want with sun bonnets in Central Africa? The women were made black that they might neither freckle nor tan. We should be better employed stitching and tailoring for the little Linsets at Allington Creek; they've scarcely a thread on them." "How I hate your modern professional philanthropy! modern professional fudge!" "I come here to see the fashions, nothing else I assure you. Mrs. Peacocke is always got up like a London milliner's doll—but I come in my oldest gown, for I have some idea left of the fitness of things, and Dorcases have no business to appear in braided hair and costly apparel."

Here Miss Cranmer slipped in beside the old lady, and made a long and apparently interesting communication to her respecting Miss Layel, who, having crumbled her biscuit into her cup of coffee and set down both almost untasted, had again retired to her secluded seat and resumed her labours on the child's petticoat that had been assigned her to make. Mrs. Peacocke was not

oblivious of the slight passed on her' hospitality, and observed significantly, that she was afraid Miss Layel did not like coffee; but Miss Layel was either absent in mind or rather deaf, for she took no notice of the observation and did not appear to have heard it. From this little incident my attention was suddenly recalled by hearing Miss Pegge Burnell say;

"Mrs. Peacocke, are you acquainted with any of the works of Mr. Alwyn Cragg?"

That lady said no—who was he and what had he written?

"He is a novelist," replied Miss Pegge Burnell, and then looking over to the diligent Miss Layel, she asked, "Miss Layel, I am sure you are an omnivorous devourer of literature;—can you recommend me any one of that gentleman's stories in particular?"

Miss Layel looked up and answered that she was afraid she could not, and then immediately reverted to her petticoat.

"I hope Miss Layel finds something better to do than weakening her mind and wasting her time over novels," added Mrs. Peacocke.

“They are a very pernicious form of literature,” said Mrs. Maurice; “I should encourage no one in reading them.”

“Now I like them,” returned Miss Pegge Burnell; “even in a moral point of view there is often an excellent suggestive lesson to be found in a novel, far more likely to be applicable to common life than anything, let us say, in *The Natural History and Habits of Termites*, which you have your hand on at this moment, Mrs. President; unless, indeed, we put aside the white ants as secondary and contemplate the fine example of patience and perseverance in the man who found out all about them.”

“And I do *not* like them,” said Mrs. Peacocke with an air of pious reproach. “Let me beg of you to put it to your *conscience*, my dear Miss Pegge Burnell, is there anything profitable to the immortal soul in reading novels? Will novels help us on our way to heaven? Can we reflect on the hours wasted over novels on a deathbed with any satisfaction?”

“Stuff and nonsense!” ejaculated Miss Pegge Burnell acrimoniously; “how will everything

look from that point of view? How will feathers, and flowers, and flounces look, and crowns, and kingdoms, and sceptres, and specious pretences and masks of virtuous hypocrisy, Mrs. Peacocke? If novels do nothing else, they sharpen our wits and make us see through people who are anything but transparent. I am a mortal foe to shams."

Mrs. Peacocke sighed as if she would intimate how grieved she was to listen to such sentiments; but Miss Pegge Burnell, who appeared to have received immunity from all the ways and customs of polite society, seemed only the more exasperated by her airs of martyrdom, and added fiercely :

"If you and I were to beat our brains for a twelvemonth we could not indite as much sense as Alwyn Cragg indites in a week. That is my complaint,—novels, now-a-days, are dramatized sermons and tracts put into action, especially with your lady writers. They will preach, they will moralize, they will have their little say on great subjects instead of sticking to their story."

"As for lady novelists, I am like the Saturday

Reviewers, I have not common patience with them," said Mrs. Peacocke.

"I know one or two that I should like to leave a legacy to," retorted Miss Pegge Burnell; "I can spare so much from the Society for the Suppression of Fools."

"Don't you think they might be included under its operations?" suggested Mrs. Peacocke spitefully.

At this point Mrs. Maurice intimated that the twenty minutes' interlude for coffee and biscuits was expired, and that we ought now quietly to resume our needles as became worthy sisters of the Society of Dorcas. On this hint everybody subsided into silence, the missionary book again came into play, and nothing but that was heard any more until the gilt timepiece on the mantelshelf struck seven, when our entertainer interrupted our labours with the, to me, welcome announcement that it was time to close the meeting. On that the person nearest the bell rang it, and Mr. Foxley was summoned from the study where he had apparently been roasting himself at a very ardent fire; he read a chapter



and gave a prayer in his usual manner, after which the meeting hurriedly dispersed.

"I am glad I went," said Ursula as we were on our way home; "though but for that scene with Miss Pegge Burnell I should have been bored to extinction. What an invaluable old woman she is for putting down cant! But now that I have seen how these meetings are carried on and who attends them, I shall go no more; it is a sheer waste of time, and my forefinger is as rough as a nutmeg-grater with stitching at that odious striped shirt. Here we are at the door, and I hope tea is ready, for I am famished. I could not touch the coffee for the horrid stable-smell of that boy who handed it round, but I suppose Mrs. Peacocke must either die or do everything genteelly."

## XI.

## VISITING.

BUT a short time after the Dorcas Meeting, Mrs. Peacocke seemed likely to win with my sister Ursula the reputation of a person worth knowing; for one morning while we were at breakfast the objectionable boy came up with a note of invitation for that day week—tea, nine o'clock. The long notice and the formal style of the document inspired Ursula with the happy assurance that it would be a “real party”—and she wrote an immediate acceptance in the politest terms.

“Notwithstanding her solemn airs of superior piety that little woman will go down on her knees to anybody with rank or money,” said Ursula. “But that is nothing to us if she behaves civilly. I daresay we shall meet all the best people in Redcross there, and so I might as

well make up that new white lisse of mine, for I don't suppose I am likely to have a better occasion to wear it this winter."

And in this joyful anticipation, with Connie's willing assistance, Ursula set to work at once, and I am afraid to say how many yards they ran between them in the making of that pretty dress. But the skirt had six flounces and on every flounce there were five narrow rows of blue velvet and the body was trimmed to correspond; and when it was made and put on, I do not remember ever to have seen Ursula look nicer. She was never either pretty or graceful; the emphasis of her character, so to speak, enunciated itself in her mien and gait; but when she was dressed well, she looked well—as well as a young woman can do who owes very little to nature but much to careful personal cultivation. She might never have been to a party before from the anxiety with which she speculated upon this one; and by dint of hearing her talk about it so constantly, I began to feel that it must be a splendid entertainment indeed to fulfil her expectations. She laid me under orders to appear in full dress, and

ruled also that the occasion was worthy of a carriage from Scarccliffe to take us and bring us home again; the usual method of going out to tea at Redcross being with a procession of lanterns.

All the morning of the momentous day she was busy putting the finishing touches to her new dress, arranging and rearranging the wreath for her hair, and disposing in twenty different styles the ornaments which would be most suitable to be worn with them; all the afternoon she was similarly employed, and when evening came she could not settle a moment, but would have her bedroom fire lighted and go up to dress at least a couple of hours too soon. When the carriage, however, came to the door and she appeared in the drawing-room to show herself to papa and mamma before we set off, papa could not help exclaiming;

“Well, Ursie, I will not say your labour is lost; turn about, my dear; let us look at you all round,” and after a critical examination he pronounced her “quite a success.”

“I dressed her, mamma, and does she not look

grand?" cried Connie, who was holding her bouquet while she put on her gloves.

"Very grand," replied mamma approvingly.

"Quite a work of art," added papa; and then nurse Bradshaw who was standing in the open door suggested that we were keeping the carriage waiting, and had we not better go?

"Yes, I think we had. Doris, are you ready?" said Ursula, sighing with happy satisfaction; but when she looked round and saw me her face changed, and she cried pettishly, "Your high muslin dress and nothing in your hair! I do call that disrespectful to Mrs. Peacocke. Mamma, make her go upstairs and put in her pearl pins or something; she always will try to look unlike everybody else."

"Nonsense, miss, nonsense; your sister will do very well," interposed papa. "Get away quickly and shut that door."

I had to support a little tirade, however, when we got into the carriage, for Ursula did not cease fault-finding and predicting all manner of social disasters that were to result from my disrespectful attire, until we turned up the by-road leading to

the Peacockes' house. Her thoughts then took another direction, and after a few moments' silence she observed :

"I don't hear any carriages—do you think we are early? you always *will* go so early everywhere, Doris."

When we stopped at the door there was some delay in opening it, and we could hear the clink of crockery and hasty voices in the hall; but at last a female servant admitted us, took our cloaks, hung them over her arm, and led the way to the drawing-room, saying, as she did so :

"The company will soon be out of the dining-room, ma'am,—dessert has just gone in."

She entered with us, lighted two candles on the centre table, murmured something about the fire having got very low—it was nearly out—and then left us to ourselves in the cold, empty room.

Ursula immediately turned to me and inquired :

"Now, Doris, can you tell me what *this* means?"

"It means," replied I, entering fully into her



indignant disappointment,—“it means that we are asked to come in to tea after a dinner-party.”

“It is the most insolent piece of presumption I ever met with in my life, to send a formal invitation for an affair like this! I am starved to death—I shall ring for my cloak;” and she rang accordingly, but nobody came, so she took the knitted woollen *couvre-pied* from the sofa and put that over her shoulders.

I was shivering too, for the night was bitter cold, but I did not dare stir the starved embers of the fire, because there was nothing for the purpose but a brilliant steel poker, evidently only an honorary member of society. So I walked about the room and inspected a collection of very bad oil-paintings in very gorgeous frames, and then turned over the illustrated annuals which radiated symmetrically from a flower-vase in the middle of the table like the spokes of a wheel. I was vexed myself because Ursula was vexed, but I said nothing to her, for I saw she had to exercise the utmost self-control to refrain from tears; the pleasantness of her countenance had

all vanished, and the chilly atmosphere of the room had made her features look pinched and purple.

Our first interruption was from an old frowsy woman who appeared with wood and coals to revive the fire, and about ten minutes after we heard a rustling of dresses, low voices and laughter, and in came Miss Pegge Burnell, Mrs. Maurice, Mrs. Willoughby, Miss Theodora Bousfield, and Mrs. Peacocke. Our hostess came up to us, quite flushed and jubilant:—

“I am very glad to see you, so *very* glad to see you,” said she impressively, and then left us to rejoin Mrs. Willoughby, whom we recognized as the wife of a half-pay naval officer living at a villa about midway between Scarcliffe and Redcross.

Miss Pegge Burnell placed herself close by the now kindled fire, and, beckoning me to go to her, she inquired with a significant glance at Ursula;

“Did you know what you were coming to?”

I told her, No, on which she looked at our entertainer with a pout of scorn and said:

“She always serves the young people in this way when they will bear it—knocks them off by twos and threes after a dinner-party. She invited the Layels too, but they would not come, and I commend them for it. Your sister is got up quite for a royal affair. She should have kept that pretty dress for my *omnium gatherum*—it is uncommonly tasteful. But how cold and cross she does look! This room is never entered except for company, and it is always as cold as a well and uncomfortable as an upholsterer’s shop.”

Mrs. Maurice almost yawned as she asked after papa and mamma, and Miss Theodora Bousfield, who had thrown herself into a corner of the couch, looked inexpressibly bored and sleepy, and everybody glanced at the timepiece, to see how long it wanted to ten o’clock. Then the village baker appeared in evening costume and handed round delicate little cups of excellent coffee—very different to the Dorcas coffee—and while this was in progress of consumption, Mr. Peacocke with four other gentlemen came in from the dining-room. Mr. Peacocke evidently regarded us as a

surprise, and seemed to wonder what in the world had brought us there, and after a few words of greeting he went over to his wife for explanation, but she just moved her sharp elbow significantly, as much as to say, "Be quiet now," and sent him away unsatisfied. Mr. Maurice we knew, but the other three gentlemen were strangers to us: no introduction took place, but we heard one with a red face addressed as Captain Willoughby, and a courtly little old gentleman with a suspicion of powder on his hair as Dr. Eden, and a young man with a stately mien and a fastidious mouth as his nephew, Dr. Julius Eden. The two last we knew by sight, because they occupied a seat at church very near our own, and lived together in a large, antiquated brick house just as we entered Scarcliffe.

Miss Pegge Burnell summoned the old physician to a seat near herself, and Dr. Julius took the vacant place on the couch by Miss Theodora Bousfield, with whom he had an air of confidential intimacy. Then the baker brought round cups of tea, and the disagreeable boy followed in his track with a cake-basket of biscuits, both of which

Ursula dismissed as she had previously dismissed the coffee with a stern, "No, thank you!" The people who had dined looked serene, and warm and sleepy, but Ursula and I were very shivering. I think disappointment gives a physical sensation of chill as well as a mental one—and it was a relief to me when Miss Pegge Burnell's carriage was announced and a period was put to our sufferings. She asked if she could take us home, but Ursula replied loftily that our carriage was ordered to come with the others, and she supposed it would be at the door immediately.

So we all left the drawing-room in a cluster, Mrs. Peacocke accompanying us; but as we were delayed about five minutes after the other guests had driven off, we had that interval to enjoy her company all to ourselves. She had the air of thinking we must have been made superlatively happy by her hospitality; she admired Ursula's dress, her wreath, her bouquet, and the necklace of mamma's she wore; but Ursula refused to be propitiated, and having endured this stroking down in silence as long as she could, she said shortly and sharply:

“Mrs. Peacocke, if ever you invite any of us again, will you be so good as to warn us what sort of an entertainment to expect? It is not worth while dressing and hiring a carriage from Scarcliffe to go out to tea at nine o’clock after a dinner-party.”

Mrs. Peacocke laughed and replied :

“Oh, my dear, I thought you would be grateful for any little amusement.”

“Not at all, Mrs. Peacocke,” replied Ursula with dignity.

Our hostess did not appear in the least affronted, she wished us good-night affectionately, sent her kindest regards to papa and mamma, and only spoke of Ursula afterwards as a young person of “rather peculiar manners.”

Of course, they were all surprised at home to see us back so soon.

“You have not been an hour out of the house !” cried nurse Bradshaw.

“You have paid too dear for your whistle this time,” said papa.

“Never mind, my love,” whispered mamma, and she went away upstairs with Ursula, who,



now that all necessary restraint was removed, had fairly burst out crying. Connie was sympathetically indignant and nurse Bradshaw's opinion of Mr. Peacocke's professional skill was henceforth unreasonably but irretrievably blighted.

## XII.

## PLANS AND AMUSEMENTS.

"AFTER the very delightful specimen of Redcross sociability which we had last night, I don't care if I never taste anybody's salt again in the whole place," my sister Ursula announced while we were sitting at breakfast the following morning.

I said that now it was over I could not help feeling how ridiculous the little scene was when we were shown into the starved and empty drawing-room, and all our brilliant expectations sank to zero.

"I do not perceive that the probability of our being laughed at improves the matter; and, of course, everybody could see with half an eye that we were disappointed," replied Ursula.

"You must not expect to be invited to dinner-

parties, Ursie," papa assured her; "young women are not worth dinner-parties."

"I don't expect to be invited to dinner-parties, papa," she answered tartly; "but I think it is a great piece of impertinence when a lackered little body, like Mrs. Peacocke, presents her best compliments and formally requests the pleasure of any one's company, at a week's date, to sit in an ice-house from nine o'clock at night till ten, and partake of a biscuit and cup of cold tea in the presence of a group of people who have just risen, serene and satisfied, from a capital dinner."

Mamma added that she thought it was very inconsiderate of Mrs. Peacocke, who was under no obligation to invite us at all, but she advised us to dismiss the subject from our minds, since it was of no use to chafe about what was past redress.

Whatever had been Ursula's expectations in connection with this entertainment, they appeared now to have vanished utterly. She and I had a long private, serious conversation<sup>\*</sup> that day about the propriety and expedience of her taking a situation; and her views on the matter were by

no means unreasonable. She was a person of great physical energy and an almost restless mental activity; she found no congenial friends and no sufficient occupation about her, and she began to feel inexpressibly bored and wearied in our narrow home-circle; a wider and more important sphere was, she assured me, becoming a necessity of her nature.

"I am not afraid of work if the work be to my taste," said she. "I am sure I could teach thoroughly what I know, and I believe I could make a governess-life, which some women rave about as so intolerable, very comfortable indeed. Of course I should not allow myself to be trodden down as such poor-spirited creatures are, and, in the end, I have no doubt I should get on admirably."

"It must be a dull existence at the best, Ursie, and one of monotonous restraint," I told her. "It would be very wearing to your mind to be always pinned down to the level of young children—and you are not fond of them either."

"No, I do not like children, but I can keep them in order," she admitted. "My chief diffi-

culty is about papa and mamma; how they would like my going out? They never say a word when I allude to it."

"But there can be no two opinions as to what they feel; they cannot bear the idea," I assured her. "They do not see that there is any necessity for it, but, at the same time, if you are bent on the experiment, I do not think they will gainsay you."

"That is what it must come to," she replied. "You are fortunately provided for, but were anything to happen to papa and mamma, Connie and I would be left literally destitute."

"You may be sure, Ursie, that whatever I possessed would be shared with both of you," I told her.

"I don't know; it might not be in your power. For instance, if you were to marry——"

"You may put that obstacle out of your calculations; I never shall marry," said I; "but I hope you and Connie will."

"It is not probable that *I* shall now. I have no fortune and I am no beauty, and I am not likely to meet with anybody in a place like this to take a fancy to my usefulness. Connie may

fare better—one can see that by and by she will be perfectly handsome, and she always was a pet with gentlemen ever since she wore bare legs and a bunch of blue sash round her waist. It is as well to be candid with oneself now and then, and to look at one's prospects all round—and when I spread out my hand of cards, I see plainly inscribed thereon spinsterdom and governesshood.”

“I don't like to hear you say that, Ursie; you are so young yet—who knows?” said I, thinking a vague hope better than none.

“I do not see the necessity for marrying in the light that some women do,” she replied. “If I may work and be independent, and take a respectable position at the same time, I can stand very well by myself. Nobody will catch me drivelling and whining—if I may not be happy in one way I will in another.”

“But the happiest way to be happy is to be happily married,” said I. “I know I should have preferred it had Philip Massey lived.”

“Of course you would. There is no question in which position a woman has the most honour and influence; but I have met with no Philip



Massey, as you very well know, and I am not disposed to wait sentimentally for the chance of his coming, with idle hands in my lap, when I might be working to a purpose and putting a little spirit into the life which it is much more probable I shall have to lead. There are three times as many women in the country as there are men, so it is nonsense for all to expect to marry."

"I am not statistical, Ursie," replied I; "but I think you make out too bad a case for yourself."

"Look at Miss Theodora Bousfield—her position is good enough and she lives by giving singing lessons—or at the Miss Layels; we are told they are entirely dependent on themselves—all three working, educated women. I should like their independence better than my own quiet, useless life at home. As governesses go, I dare say I might get a salary of eighty guineas a year."

"You would be very fortunate if you did. Such salaries are by no means common," said I; "especially at first going out."

"Perhaps not, but I should not like to take less. However, as you all seem so much against

it, I will wait until spring and see what the next three months bring forth. I anticipate nothing, but I do not wish to take an important step in haste to repent it at leisure under the imputation of having only my own rashness to blame."

When Ursula was reasonable she was *very* reasonable; and these seasons I had always observed to follow upon some personal humiliation which, for the time being, had put down her rather self-sufficient temper and compelled her to view her merits and her pretensions by the light of truth. The process was disagreeable to go through undoubtedly, but it was so far salutary in this, that it checked her perversity and spirit of domineering, and made her, as Miss Heywood used to phrase it, find her own level. The mortification and disappointment in connection with Mrs. Peacocke's party, while it abated her expectations, did more to reconcile her to our reduced fortunes than anything that had happened since we left Roseberry. She gave up harping on what we might have been and on what we had lost, and in ceasing to enforce a respect due to an imaginary dignity, she became almost digni-

fied. I could not enter into all her views and feelings myself; we were naturally of quite opposite characters; but I began to have more sympathy with her revolt against inaction, and to hope that something would occur to employ her superfluous energies, to her own profit and our peace at home, before many more months went over our heads.

The monotony of our daily lives, which fretted her so grievously, was acceptable to me. I always had something to do at home, and whether I would or no, Mrs. Maurice had enlisted me in her staff of parish assistants. She had placed me in charge of a class of big boys at the school, she sent me to read to select old women, and she claimed my special help in cutting out and making ready the work before each meeting of the Dorcas Society. I was new to these duties, and, at first, I did not like them, but in process of time I found my interest in them all, and a far higher amount of pleasure and satisfaction than I could have supposed they would yield before I tried them. But, as Ursula said, I had no originality, and if thrust into a groove which

was rough to begin with, I was apt to plod up and down in it until I had worn its inequalities smooth and got so used to it that it would be pain and grief to me to be set in a less familiar way. In which she was not far wrong. I grew old early, and I seem ever since to have been learning the philosophy of *putting up* with things that I could not *put off*.

Connie's chief pleasure and amusement consisted in long walking expeditions everywhere over the country, in which I was most frequently her companion. I recollect her leading me a pretty dance across the downs one brisk December day, during which we lost ourselves and were overtaken by the early falling darkness before we could reach home again. There had been nearly a fortnight's frost, and the down-tracks were clean and hard as flint, but after an hour's walking in quite an unfamiliar direction they merged in a confused mass of furze-bushes and faded heather, with here and there a tree, warped and distorted by the fierce winds, stretching its ragged arms against the cold cloudy blue of the sky.

"What fun it would be to lose ourselves,"

cried Connie; "I don't think we ever were lost, Doris!"

"It would not be very difficult to do," I replied, stopping and looking round the horizon. "For example, if we saw a snow-storm coming on now, which way should we take as the shortest to find shelter?"

Connie demurred to the question—she really did not know.

Neither did I; we were quite out of sight of all familiar places, but I suspected that the shoulder of St. Cross hid them, so I proposed that we should go down to a certain point and take an observation. We liked making rounds—if we had chosen to return by the way we had come, it would have been easy to retrace our steps, but that was not our object—it was pleasant to find out beautiful new walks and to announce the same when we arrived at home tired. My suggestion was accordingly followed, but when the point was reached we only looked down on the steep ribbed side of a chalky cliff tufted with scant grass; at the bottom was a scrubby wood, then two narrow fields ending in

a sharp ridge, and far below the open sea. We had got beyond and above Avonmore Head, behind which lay Scarccliffe Bay, Scarccliffe, and Redcross, and a high road we supposed there must certainly be, though from our present position we could see nothing of it."

"As we don't know where we are, we may consider ourselves *really* lost," said Connie exhilarated.

"Yes; if it be a pleasurable sensation," replied I; "but, for my part, I begin to think this grim north-easter, which we shall have full in our teeth in returning, just a *little* drawback to the charms of the situation."

"Oh! I love the wind," and Connie stretched out her arms as if to embrace it.

"Come," said I, "your enthusiasm may keep you warm, but it whistles through me as if I were a skeleton!"

"Let us take a run! I'll race you back to the last gate we came through."

Connie took an unfair start and beat, of course, but the rapid exercise counteracted the effect of the north-easter and put us both in a glow. It was very



good to come out with Connie ; it made the blood run faster and swept the cobwebs out of my brains ; but I thought it was now time to make the best of our way home ; for, as the crow flies, we must then have been full four miles away, and it was past three o'clock of the afternoon.

So we set our faces towards Redcross, but in attempting a short cut we soon came to a standstill amongst a tangle of tracks in the ling and were quite undecided which to take. After looking round and looking at the sky interrogatively for some minutes, Connie espied a white curl of smoke rising above a ridge of the down only a short way off, and proposed that we should run across to the dwelling it betrayed to inquire of our whereabouts. We forced our way accordingly through clinging bushes till we came to a ragged thorn hedge and a stile ; beneath was an unkempt vegetable garden, sloping down the steep, and, quite in the hollow, fronting to the south, was a thatched cottage.

“ Pretty little nook ! ” cried Connie, “ but who would have thought of any one living in an out-of-the-way place like this ! ”

The winterly sunshine was yellowing the cottage wall where a dark bushy myrtle grew up with a few deep crimson buds of a late rose peeping out from its thick verdure. As we approached nearer, we saw that the garden round about it was more carefully tended and that it had an air of comfort and occupation. The sound of our steps and voices brought to the door an elderly woman dressed in mourning with some plain needlework in her hand; she came a pace or two out to meet us, with a look of disturbed inquiry on her face, and I immediately stated how we had lost our way and wished to be put in the road for getting back to Redcross. She turned her head to the lattice window, which was standing open, and said to some one within,—

“Paul, my dear, will you put these strangers into the way of getting back to Redcross?” Glancing in the same direction I saw a low-ceiled room shelved round with books, and a man seated at a table writing; he rose as his mother appealed to him, and came to the door with his pen in his hand. He did not look at us, but pointing down a rough lane from the

garden-gate, told us hastily that we must follow its windings until we came to another gate, which would bring us into the high road about three miles and a half from Redcross, and was at once returning to his work, when his mother suggested aside that the gate would be locked.

Connie exclaimed,—

“Oh, we can climb over the gate, thank you!” but with a few hasty words about its not being an easy gate for ladies to climb, he snatched up a key from the window-sill, came out, and led the way down the lane. I said I was extremely sorry to give him the trouble, but he took no notice and marched on in advance, his uncovered, grizzled hair fluttering in the wind, and his long lean limbs swinging in a swift easy gait. It taxed even Connie to keep up with him, and by the time he reached the gate we had fallen some way behind. He was waiting with it open when we came up and merely bowing his head in acknowledgment of our thanks, locked it behind us, and turned back to the cottage.

“I have seen that man somewhere before,” said Connie as we both put our best foot fore-

most on the hard frozen road. I thought I had seen him too, or somebody exceedingly like him, but neither of us could remember where; only we agreed that the house in the hollow was a queer place for him to be living in unless he were poet, philosopher or hermit, or all three combined.

Walking our swiftest we did not reach home until nearly an hour after dark, and only just in time to escape a heavy fall of snow, so we had to listen to lectures from all parties and to promise to take no more rambles of the kind, until lengthening days gave us more time to lose and find ourselves again.

## XIII.

## A MORNING AT THE PRIORY.

EMBALMED between the leaves of my old Thought-Book, I have a few curiosities of literature which serve as notes to the brief entries in the text. Of this date I find a quaint little epistle of Miss Pegge Burnell's, written on pink satin notepaper, and still exhaling the delicate perfume which always reminds me of her. It was addressed to all of us and says, much like an echo of her own deep voice speaking, "I make no calls in this weather, girls, but I want to see you. When it is warmer I shall pay your father and mother a visit to talk about Roseberry. I remember that place when I was young, for I spent some of the happiest days of my life there. If they will waive ceremony with an old woman, all whose bones are full of tooth-ache while this east wind blows,

and come up to see her, she will be delighted. I prefer receiving visitors at lunch time, when they can eat or let it alone as it suits them—that is, between twelve and two; if they come earlier I am not downstairs—if they come later it interferes with my drive. Mind the pretty one is of the party. Yours sincerely, Cecilia Pegge Burnell.”

This document was answered in person by papa, mamma, and the pretty one walking up to the Priory the following day. Papa returned charmed with the old lady and all her surroundings, and from Connie’s account she must have made herself truly delightful. She had given them a description of Roseberry as she recollected it in the time of Admiral Villers, and had asked a thousand and one questions about the improvements and alterations papa had made while it was in his possession; she was curious to learn whether such and such walks in the gardens remained as they were formerly, and whether certain trees were standing of which she had a distinct remembrance. Mamma fancied she must have some sentimental interest in the place from the vividness with which she recalled its minutest



features. She wanted to know if the front door steps were yet in a semicircle and worn very hollow in the middle; and when papa told her, no, he had had them renewed on first going there, she said, "And not before they required it. The edge of the second step was quite worn away; but Admiral Villers was a stingy old hunk, and every man, woman and child in the kingdom might have broken their bones before he would have spent sixpence to mend it." In telling Ursula and myself what had passed, Connie added of her own opinion, "I do not believe the poor old lady was born so deformed as she is, neither does mamma. We think it must have been the result of some accident that happened, perhaps, at Roseberry."

Miss Pegge Burnell had sent a request that Ursula, Connie and I would go up and visit her at her favourite hour, the day but one after, and as we could all be spared we went accordingly. She, however, had had a very bad night and was not yet out of her room, so she sent a message to us to perambulate the grounds for half an hour, at the end of which time she would be ready

to receive us ; but on no account were we to go away.

We gladly availed ourselves of the permission, and deep winter though it was, the sunshine upon the down side was so clear and the evergreens were so beautiful, that when we came round upon the south terrace beneath the windows of the principal rooms, we might have imagined that spring had arrived there already. The Priory was a solidly built, irregular old place, over the grey, time-fretted stones of which no ivy or other covering had been permitted to grow ; but close under the wall there was a narrow border running the whole length of the house, the delicious wafts of perfume from which betrayed the whereabouts of innumerable violets. This terrace commanded a glorious prospect ; from thence we could overlook the village and the lovely meadows which then bordered the road down to Scarcliffe ; we could trace the daily-growing new town and the crowded roofs of the old one ; we could descry the dotted figures on the pier, the ships in the harbour and the whole arc of the beautiful bay, with the Castle high perched on the frowning

North Cliff. Redcross itself was a bowery little spot, with its very ancient church and nest of humble thatched cottages, which no speculative builder had yet been permitted to buy up; and the park extending behind it to the verge of the cliffs was grouped over with magnificent timber trees, while a hanging fir wood on the lower slope of the down formed a dark background to the long grey front of the house. The gardens were formed on three terraces and though they were now bare of flowers, the turf was so green and velvety and the choice shrubs were planted to so good an effect, that no air of winterly desolation and decay in the foreground marred the soft loveliness of the scene.

We had scarcely completed our survey when we were summoned to enter the house by an intimation that Miss Pegge Burnell was now come down stairs and was ready to receive us. When we appeared she immediately said in a voice of querulous suffering, "Girls, I don't apologize—all my friends have consented to take me by chance just as I happen to be, and I hope you will do the same. To-day I happen to be

very bad, and that is worse for me than for you."

She would not, however, listen to any condolences or inquiries, and in answer to our proposal to leave her, she said,—

"If you want to vex me past my patience you can go. I like young people, but it is not all of them who can put up with me, I know. It gives me pleasure and takes my thoughts away from myself, to see happy faces about me, and I am much obliged to you for coming; but if you don't like it, don't stay."

So, of course, we stayed, and in talking of various things—pictures, books and events that were happening in the world, she did, indeed, appear to lose the paramount sense of her own pain. My sister Ursula was excellent company for such an occasion. She was a diligent student of *The Times*, she read new books and reviews systematically for the purpose of getting up subjects of conversation; she made the best of every one of her talents; she had opinions and maintained them; she talked with emphasis and rarely talked nonsense; and she was now able

to give Miss Pegge Burnell a summary of general intelligence in which no London correspondent could have beaten her. Connie's place and mine was that of submissive listeners; Ursula had elected herself to be the clever one of our family, a dignity which no one disputed, and when she spoke we held our peace.

She had great manual dexterity; she could read French, German and Italian, and was well up in such literature as is supplied by language masters to their pupils; she drew—that is to say, she *copied*; she played on the piano, but in a hard, fighting, unsentimental way, very trying to listen to if she went on with the exercise long; and on every one of her accomplishments she had her views, which no modest diffidence withheld her from enunciating in any company.

Once or twice I thought Miss Pegge Burnell answered her with covert irony, but Ursula did not appear conscious of it, and she looked immensely flattered when the poor old lady said—

“I should like you for my companion, Miss Ursula, if you had a lighter foot, and did not always shut doors with a clap.” Ursula wanted

to know how Miss Pegge Burnell could have discovered that she clapped doors. "I reason by analogy, my dear," was the answer; "when I see a young woman who shakes the room as she walks across it, I am morally certain that she will either clap the door or leave it standing wide open."

"How observant you must be!" cried Ursula; "that is what I always do."

I do not remember ever to have seen a more luxurious picture of wealthy spinsterhood than that offered to our admiration in the Priory drawing-room. It was grave and quiet, but it had an aspect of generous warmth and amplitude which, from the first time of my entering it, became inseparable in my mind, from its owner's personality. It was long and lofty, and lined with polished oak panels, in each division of which hung a fine picture. Three deeply sunken, narrow high windows broke the south side of the room looking upon the terrace; the fireplace was opposite the centre one, and had an elaborate and grotesquely carved chimney-piece, over which was an arched window commanding



a lovely peep of the downs; the west end of the room was circular, and formed an immense bay opening into the conservatory. Disregarding the common light and airy character of a drawing-room, Miss Pegge Burnell had had carved book-cases, dark like the panelling, fitted between the windows and in the recesses on each side of the fire-place. The floor was covered with a crimson carpet, woven in one piece; starred with amber and bordered with a rich design of lilies and leaves. The draperies were also of crimson, with filmy inner white curtains drawn close over the glass, and the chairs and couches seemed to have been made with a view to accommodating every angularity of the human frame. A pleasant fire of pine-wood was flashing in the burnished grate, and along the hearth was drowsily extended a gigantic deer-hound, whose present benevolent amusement was to make lazy curves with his tail for the amusement of a fussy white Persian kitten.

Ursula testified the strongest appreciation of all this taste and comfort; she asked leave to walk round and examine the pictures, and when

her inspection was over she exclaimed rapturously,—

“It is the perfection of a room! Oh, Miss Pegge Burnell, what money can do!”

The old lady looked at her and replied with a sort of quiet vehemence,—

“I remember the time, my dear, when I would have given up all I possessed, and have promised to walk through the world barefoot for the rest of my days, if I could have arisen and been whole.”

“I meant, of course, in providing the material luxuries and comforts of life,” said Ursula, apologetically.

“Yes, yes, I understood you,” answered Miss Pegge Burnell; “you are fond of what money will purchase. Now sometimes, when I lie writhing in the midst of all these signs and appliances of fortune which you covet, unable to find a moment’s rest for my grievous aches and pains, I am ready to cry aloud that God mocks me.”

Connie impulsively laid her hand upon one of the poor old lady’s, who added with a half

careless sigh as she quietly possessed herself of it,—

“You see, pretty one, I never was a woman of a devotional turn of mind—but now let us have the bell rung for luncheon, and change the subject.”

The summons was responded to by two footmen setting wide the folding-doors which communicated with another room, and wheeling in, swiftly and smoothly, a circular table on which the luncheon was already spread. They brought it to an anchor opposite the fire-place, and Miss Pegge Burnell, glancing significantly at Ursula, said,—

“The Priory will make up forty beds, Miss Ursula, but I live habitually in two rooms,” and then she signed to us to draw round the table, placing Connie next to herself.

She was much pleasanter in her own house than she was elsewhere, this singular old lady, and her conversation showed that she was an omnivorous reader, and that she possessed a capacious and retentive memory. While Ursula was displaying her accomplishments and laying

down the law upon ancient and modern, and English and foreign literature, she had said no word that betrayed her own more varied and extensive knowledge, but it now began to crop out in chance observations, until Ursula, with her usual want of tact, exclaimed,—

“I had no idea you were a linguist as well as myself, Miss Pegge Burnell!”

“How should you, my dear? you were so good as to take my ignorance for granted,” replied the old lady, drily. “But all through the prime of my life I had nothing else to do but to make friends of my books. For more than six years I never set foot to the ground, and to have chattering, sympathetic people dangling round my sofa worried me to death. So I set up a big dog and a little cat and a reading-desk, none of which talk or wear rustling petticoats, and since then I have contrived to read most of the books you talk about.”

Miss Pegge Burnell afterwards showed Ursula the table-racks containing some of her favourite volumes, over which my sister exclaimed enthusiastically how beautifully they were bound.

"I like good books in handsome dress," replied their owner.

Ursula then scanned their titles and observed,

"Rather a queer medley—Bishop Andrewe's Devotions, Sintram, Rochefoucault's Maximes, Les Provinciales de Pascal, Petrarch's Sonnets, Wordsworth's Poems, Wilhelm Meister, In Memoriam, Archbishop Leighton's Commentary on St. Peter, and Shakspeare's Plays next to the Bible."

"After the Bible, Shakspeare's plays contain more sound philosophy and practical wisdom than any book I ever read," interposed Miss Pegge Burnell, cutting short the catalogue. "And if any of you want a volume for Sundays and Saint-days, try Leighton—there is no cant, bigotry or uncharitableness about him—nothing offensive to the most fastidious taste—it is one of the very few religious works that I can bear to read."

"It is a pet book of mamma's," said Connie.

"I can always tell whether new acquaintance will suit me by asking what sort of reading they prefer," remarked Ursula.

"It is not a bad criterion. Perhaps you would like to inspect my month's supply from town

as well as my accustomed friends—there they lie on that table,” and Miss Pegge Burnell pointed to one that stood by her couch and swung round on a pivot at the least pressure.

Ursula eagerly profited by the permission, and taking up the volumes one after another read out their names; “*Les Causeries du Lundi*, by Mons. de St. Beuve—I never heard of that work before—is it good?”

“Good for those who like it—I do,” was the reply. “The style is perfection and the subjects are almost always entertaining. St. Beuve gives a more vivid and life-like portrait within the compass of fifty pages than most other biographers succeed in elaborating in a thousand.”

“And here is a review which I have never seen before,” continued Ursula; “Mrs. Peacocke likened herself to its writers in her lack of patience with lady-novelists.”

“Did she? the resemblance begins and ends there, I should imagine. They are favourites of mine, hard as they are on women. On political affairs their tone is noble, and above all mean truckling to expedencies; on social matters they



deify Good Taste as supreme; but occasionally a spirit of spite, personality and superciliousness infuses an agreeable bitter into their pages which I do not find elsewhere, and which I confess I relish to the full as much as their scholarship, gentlemanhood and independence. But then my neighbours say I am a wicked, worldly old woman, so I may enjoy a little wickedness and worldliness without any tiresome qualms of conscience."

Ursula continued her examination. "Vanity Fair—I do like Mr. Thackeray's books, don't you, Miss Pegge Burnell?" said she; "Cromwell's Letters and Speeches, Robertson's Sermons, Companions of my Solitude,—shall you read them all? I don't know how and when you can make time—Modern Painters—that looks tough, and a common three volume novel. What is it about? all love and stuff I suppose. I never read any novels myself but the very best that all the world is talking of, for I am quite of Mrs. Peacocke's opinion in thinking that novel-reading produces a frivolous turn of mind."

"No one can accuse you of frivolity, Miss

Ursula," said Miss Pegge Burnell; "I should say you were more liable to become top-heavy with a weight of useful information superficially digested—you must not be offended at my plain speaking."

But Ursula looked mightily offended, her colour rose and she said loftily: "I am sure I am not *superficial*, though I may not have read so much as *some* persons."

"If by *some* persons you mean myself, my dear, I do not lay claim to any superiority, I assure you," returned Miss Pegge Burnell, looking slightly surprised. "At best, my mind is only an intellectual rag-bag, filled with shreds and patches of various hues and textures, which I have picked up and stored in my wallet as other mendicants do who have no riches of their own; and, of course, I like now and then to show my miscellaneous treasures. But a truce to books! let us talk about my party, which I intend to give as soon as I have got over this bad bout. Christmas is passing and I have done nothing yet to please the young folks who do so much to please me. You shall have a dance in

the picture-gallery, and I will make it worth your while to wear your prettiest dresses."

Ursula's countenance relaxed and she entered into the subject with the liveliest gusto, amusing Miss Pegge Burnell greatly by her incisive remarks on the hospitality which we had thus far been invited to enjoy. Ursula, with all her sagacity, was wonderfully indiscreet on occasion, and before our visit came to an end, there was no single person who had shown us what was meant for kindness, who had not suffered more or less smartly under the lash of her tongue. Miss Pegge Burnell encouraged her, but when we were taking our leave she said with sly sarcasm: "You have been very candid in pulling off your mask so completely, Miss Ursula; I shall never allow you to put it on again before me, therefore mind what you are about. Good-day to you, my dears; you have been excellent company, and I shall hope to see some of you again before the week is out."

I fancy Ursula was disagreeably conscious that she had let her tongue outrun her discretion, for

as we were crossing the Grove Fields on our return home, she asked me if I thought Miss Pegge Burnell was to be trusted. I told her I thought she was to be trusted in so far as not repeating severe remarks went, but that I did not think her confidence in the maker of them was likely to be enhanced—for it was noticeable that she had neither echoed nor dissented from them, and that she had not expressed one sentiment of her own throughout the conversation which could by any possibility be carried elsewhere, and misrepresented or exaggerated.

“You mean that I may trust Miss Pegge Burnell, but that Miss Pegge Burnell will not trust me,” suggested Ursula, sulkily.

“Precisely.”

“Then it is very ill-natured of you to say so! What did she mean by telling me I had pulled off my mask? I wear no mask. There is not a woman breathing who cares less for other people’s good opinion than I do, so long as I keep my own. And surely we may speak what we think—it is sheer hypocrisy to hide one’s feelings. I wish there were a little more can-

dour than there is in common society; we should get on much better."

I could not agree with Ursula; I consider candour a virtue that is all the more precious for not being abused and made subservient to splenetic purposes. It would be a much more quarrelsome world than it is, if all the ill-natured people in it were to be encouraged to go up and down saying exactly what they think; and as for the double-faced candour which she practised to nobody's deception but her own, I could only call it a mischievous trick of the tongue, which she would do wisely to beware of and correct. She got very angry for the moment, but my displeasing *candour* on the subject was not thrown away, for I observed that she became more cautious in future, and much less cutting in her personal criticisms, except when she was in the strict privacy of our home circle.

## XIV.

## MISS PEGGE BURNELL'S PARTY.

WE had not very long to wait and hope for Miss Pegge Burnell's *omnium gatherum*. The wind changed, her "bad bout" passed by, and the invitations were sent out at the beginning of the following week. Ours arrived while we were at tea, and when it had been handed round for everybody to read, Connie exclaimed with pretty exultation,—

"Oh, I shall enjoy it—there is to be a dance, mamma!"

Ursula looked at her with indignant astonishment, saying sharply,—

"But *you* will not go, Connie! this is a regular ball!"

Connie's countenance fell, and she glanced appealingly at papa, who asked,—



"Why cannot the little one go, Ursula? Let her have her amusements as well as yourself."

"She is not *out*, papa, and she will not be sixteen until next month," replied Ursula. "I was never allowed to go to a full-dress party until I was seventeen and a half, and I do not see why *she* should be favoured above *me*."

"But I think Miss Pegge Burnell will expect Connie, my dear," said mamma; "and in the country at Christmas time rules will bear a little relaxing."

"I maintain that she ought not to go," reiterated Ursula; "if she is to come out at fifteen, she will be quite stale and common, while other girls are still in the schoolroom."

Poor Connie coloured, and the tears flashed into her eyes as she said,—

"You are such a dog-in-the-manger, Ursula!"

"You can be as rude as you please, I don't care," retorted Ursula; "but if you are to be indulged in whatever way you take a fancy to now, you will be quite spoilt with flattery before you have head enough to know what rubbish it is."

"Tut, tut!" cried papa; "do you suppose you are the only judicious member of the family, that you lay down the law with such emphasis, Miss Ursula? Your mother is the proper person to speak—let her decide."

"Perhaps, Connie darling, on second thoughts, as mamma cannot go to chaperone her pet, she had better stay at home," said mamma, trying to soften the edge of her hard decree by kind words and caresses.

Ursula looked provokingly triumphant, while Connie tried to conceal her face in her tea-cup, and papa said, patting one of her pretty hands,—

"Never mind, little one; mamma knows best."

"Ursula's objections are perfect nonsense!" I could not help exclaiming at the sight of Connie's disappointment; to which Ursula replied that if I had my way, I should deny that child nothing, and should ultimately be responsible for her ruin.

"I will not have another word on the subject!" cried papa peremptorily. "Connie acquiesces in what her mother says—don't you, my dear?"

"Yes, papa," replied Connie, in a choking voice; and by and by, when she and I were alone,

she could not restrain a few very natural tears, though she scolded herself for them.

"I know I am a silly goose to cry because I may not go to a party," said she; "but it is so unkind of Ursie, and this will have been such a dull Christmas."

However, when the important evening arrived, she made us our winterly bouquets and helped Ursula to dress without showing any 'temper; only when she came into my room to see if I were ready, I perceived that the disappointment had returned upon her acutely, and that she would have a good cry when we were gone.

"I shall go to bed," said she, and I remembered the time when I should probably have cried too, had I been kept away unnecessarily from a party.

There was an incessant roll of carriages on the road to the Priory, going and returning, the sound of which raised Ursula's spirits to a pitch of the liveliest exhilaration. She was wearing her pretty blue and white dress, and was conscious of looking her very best, so her temper was almost benevolent; but I confess I was vexed with her, and I found it hard to respond in the same tone to her

cheerful anticipations. She understood the reason well enough, and probably desirous of removing my feelings of dissatisfaction she, by and by, asked me solemnly, appealing to my sense of propriety, whether I did not consider *now* that it was decidedly better Connie should have been left at home?

“No,” returned I, glad to express my sentiments, even though they could do no good; “no—she might just as well have been sitting opposite to us at this moment on the way to enjoy herself, as crying herself to sleep, which I have no doubt she is doing.”

“If she can be such a simpleton, it is a pity she has not something worse to cry for—but here we are at the door! You may get out first, Doris, and then I shall have a chance of shaking myself down.”

Miss Pegge Burnell received her guests in the drawing-room, from which they dispersed themselves through the other apartments, which were thrown open for the occasion. We entered behind Captain and Mrs. Willoughby and their daughters, and were most cordially welcomed;

but after the handshakings and other civilities were over, Miss Pegge Burnell looked beyond us, as if expecting a third person, and demanded with hasty surprise,—

“But where is the pretty one?”

“She is so young, and as this was to be a large party, mamma thought her better at home,” replied Ursula.

I never saw a face change so quickly from an expression of courteous inquiry to undissembled wrath, as did Miss Pegge Burnell’s.

“I don’t believe it!” cried she, without circumlocution; “your mother is a woman of sense. Miss Doris, how long will it take Connie to dress? I have a great mind to send for her now.”

“I am afraid your messenger would find her asleep,” said Ursula.

“Answer me plainly—did the child want to come?”

“Yes,” replied Ursula, with visible reluctance.

“And *you* have kept her away? I daresay she even cried for disappointment—did she?” The unwilling affirmative was mine this time. “If she had not, I never would have forgiven her!”

added the old lady. "Pass on, Miss Ursula, you have destroyed all the pleasure I anticipated in seeing you. It is *your* fault, I know, though you lay the blame on your mother."

And we passed on accordingly, to make way for Dr. Eden and his nephew, who had been standing behind us throughout the whole of the foregoing colloquy. Ursula's face did not recover its natural hue during the entire evening; she had flushed crimson, and her sensations of discomfort were not lessened by perceiving that Miss Pegge Burnell was making her vexation and the cause of it known to Dr. Eden.

"Let us go forward into one of the other rooms, it is so hot here," she whispered to me; and we went through the folding doors into the library, where card-tables were set out for the elders, and finding Mrs. Peacocke sitting in the middle of the sofa in the highest possible feather, but quite alone, Ursula placed herself beside her, and, in the necessity of making a confidante of somebody, immediately opened her heart to her on the subject of Connie's absence and Miss Pegge Burnell's extraordinary incivility.



Mrs. Peacocke listened and simpered, but gave no opinion, and by degrees Ursula's chafed feelings subsided, until, at last, she was able to affirm that she did not mind what Miss Pegge Burnell thought.

"I know I was right to prevent Connie's coming—look what a host of people there are here," added she; "I would do the same thing again to-morrow, if needful. Doris, let us walk on and see if we can discover any more of our friends."

So we left Mrs. Peacocke in serene state, and entered the long picture-gallery, which had been arranged for dancing, with crimson-covered couches down either side, and waxlights fixed in clusters between the panels, on which hung in grim rows the Pegge Burnell ancestors; their frames cheerfully festooned for the occasion with Christmas holly. At the upper end there was a temporary orchestra, in which the band of the regiment then stationed in Scarccliffe were busy arranging their music and their instruments for a commencement. Gay groups of ladies, officers in uniform, and black-coated civilians, were scattered up and down in readiness to fall into place and

begin at the first note; and Ursula whispered to me that she did not think she had ever been at a prettier party, even when we lived at Roseberry. Miss Pegge Burnell always filled the Priory with staying company previous to her *omnium gatherums*; and these, combined with the military and naval men, their wives and daughters, and a large selection from the resident and temporarily resident gentry within five or six miles round, made up altogether a very brilliant assemblage. We saw there, however, for the present, none of our acquaintance but Miss Cranmer, who was sitting with her mother, to whom she introduced us, in a conspicuous seat, waiting, apparently, for a partner. She was glad of some one new to talk to, and in answer to Ursula's remark that there were more people present and still arriving than she fancied the neighbourhood could have brought together, she told us that Miss Pegge Burnell had issued three hundred invitations and had only received thirty excuses. Miss Cranmer spoke in round numbers, but I think she must have made a little overstatement from what I observed myself; but

even allowing two-thirds for exaggeration, there were still plenty of people to fill the long gallery when they stood up to dance, and to leave, besides, a residuum on the benches, round the card-tables, and in the drawing-room exchanging the news of the world.

Ursula sat out the first set, not being introduced to any partner, but when it was nearly over, to her visible consternation, Mr. Barstow was seen edging his way towards us. She tried hard not to appear to observe him, but he advanced directly up to her, and bowing preposterously, said with an extravagant air of compliment :

“What do I see? Miss Ursula Fletcher amongst the wallflowers! *May* I have the honour of taking a turn with her when this set is over?”

Ursula acceded with the worst grace imaginable, and said to me aside :

“If I refuse to waltz with him I shall have to refuse everybody else all through the evening,” and she actually stood up with him, looking as proud as Semiramis. Miserable moments must

the next ten have been, for the Fortuner had no ear, and after bringing her into violent collision with three other pairs, she extricated herself from his clutch, and returned to her seat, saying with angry decision, "Mr. Barstow, you *cannot* waltz."

He followed with profuse apologies; he was so sorry, but he never *could* get into step at first starting, passionately fond as he was of rotatory movements; he was afraid he had torn her dress—he should be only too happy to repair the damage; he hoped she would try him again, if not in a waltz, at least in a quadrille; but Ursula pettishly replied that she did not know whether she should dance any more or not; on which her tormentor said then he would wait and hope. And accordingly he did wait and hope, close at her elbow, until the pleasure of her hand not having been solicited by any other person, a set of Lancers was formed in which another couple was wanted. Ursula had courage to supply the vacancy with her delightful partner, and they went through the figures, achieving more blunders and causing

more confusion than even those complicated doubles and twists are commonly susceptible of.

"I quite pity your sister to be made such a spectacle," said Mrs. Cranmer feelingly; "Mr. Barstow ought never to dance."

For my part, the exhibition was so ludicrous, yet so annoying, that I presently quitted the gallery and returned to the drawing-room. Miss Pegge Burnell had now accomplished the first part of her labours, and was slowly circulating amongst her guests, to see that they were duly entertained; the moment she espied me, she signed that she had something to say, and when I drew near she asked how Ursula was getting on. I told her she was then dancing with Mr. Barstow, on which she grinned and replied: "She deserves it for a penance; but I was rather rude to her, so I will go and make amends;" and snatching Dr. Julius Eden from Miss Theodora Bousfield, with the remark that he had flirted long enough and must now go and dance for his supper, she marched him away to the gallery, and introduced him to Ursula, who, the next time I looked in, was enjoying a beautiful galop with him for a part-

ner. "Now I have done my duty," said our hostess, with austere dissatisfaction as she returned; "but Miss Ursula will never be a favourite of mine. My belief is that she is jealous of the pretty one!"

Dr. Julius Eden, when he had accomplished his dance with Ursula, attempted to return to the drawing-room, and the fascinating society of Miss Theodora Bousfield, but Miss Pegge Burnell detected the manœuvre and drove him back, telling him he should not be idle—he had come to a Christmas ball and he must do his Christmas duty. He endeavoured to remonstrate, but he was not listened to, and a little while after I again saw him standing up with Ursula. While I was watching them, I heard an obsequious voice behind me uttering my name, and turning my head I saw it was the Fortuner, who, wearing an expression of almost ecstatic delight, was following the figure of my sister with admiring eyes, and murmuring incoherent tributes of compliment to her in my ear. "Noble presence," said he, "dignity of a duchess! Miss Fletcher, your sister is the finest woman in the room—the



finest woman I ever saw! Such a high complexion, such a supreme air—" and then he went off hastily to a better post of observation, and stood against the wall in an elegant attitude, with his head on one side and his mysterious eye screwed up under a gold-rimmed glass.

"I think," said Miss Cranmer laughing, "your sister has achieved a conquest."

I did not like the remark, and probably looked grave enough over it, for she added, "Mr. Barstow is better than he looks—he is a very generous little man and very wealthy, and I believe it is all a fiction about his having been a hairdresser. But it is stupid of him to make a lady conspicuous by his obtrusive admiration—she ought to put him down—what *is* he going to do?"

This last exclamation was elicited by Mr. Barstow rushing suddenly across the room and thrusting his elbow at poor Ursula with a breathless "Permit me—supper;" on which Dr. Julius Eden stood back and resigned his partner, glancing down at his supplanter with a whimsical smile of surprise curling about his handsome mouth. Ursula had no alternative but to accept the proffered

arm and walk away to the supper room, looking red and vexed beyond measure; the dancers trooped off in the same direction, and when the gallery was nearly empty, Dr. Julius glancing round, perceived me and volunteered his escort, observing with a queer twinkle of his expressive eyes, "I thought myself provided with a companion in your sister, Miss Fletcher, but Mr. Barstow's movements are surprisingly prompt—he overcame me by stratagem; had I been aware of his object, I should have had a sincere pleasure in disappointing him."

We found ourselves placed at table directly opposite to Ursula and the Fortuner, who made himself obtrusively agreeable, or disagreeable, to her by frequent confidential whisperings, which could hardly fail to attract observation; but the little man had evidently not the slightest suspicion that she could be otherwise than flattered and delighted by his assiduities. There was a dish of crackers near them from which he helped himself without stint, and having arranged his spoils ingeniously in the form of a star upon his plate, he said, "Now Miss Ursula:" and

offered her one to pull with him. Ursula took hold of it as if she expected it would burn her fingers, and when it exploded, she looked across at me and said she was in a state of passive resignation, but she did not wear the appearance of that frame of mind at all. Annoyance, shame, and vexation combined had heated her face in crimson patches, her exertions in dancing had loosened her hair and disarranged her wreath, until she looked anything but the pleased and well-dressed Ursula who had left home a few hours before in such exhilarated spirits. The motto which the Fortuner had extracted from the cracker must, I imagine, have been of a warmly affectionate character, for after reading it himself, he offered it to her with a significant chuckle, and as she pouted contemptuously and averted her head, he put it in his waistcoat pocket with as jubilant an air as he might have worn had he been an accepted lover, and that the frank avowal of her tender sentiments for him.

Dr. Julius Eden had Miss Theodora Bousfield on his left hand, and to her he dedicated his chief conversation, only now and then favouring

me with any remark; but he took care that I had plenty to eat, and I was perfectly satisfied to be left quiet; for already I was growing tired and longing to be at home. After supper, however, the dancing was renewed with fresh vigour, and as Ursula was yet unwilling to leave, I sat down by Miss Cranmer and heard her remarks on the gay groups that passed and repassed before us. The Maurices and Mrs. Braithwaite were not present, and Miss Cranmer's account of them was that the Maurices disapproved of dancing and of large, late parties, and that Mrs. Braithwaite was nobody—she was trying to worm her way into society but she had small chance of success, for Miss Pegge Burnell, Mrs. Willoughby and all the *best* people had omitted calling upon her; she was never to be met, Miss Cranmer believed, except at the parsonage and the Dorcas gatherings. I had not before observed that the Layels were there, but the little dark one came up to us, and Miss Cranmer eagerly made room for her on the same couch with ourselves, asking at the same time where she had been hiding herself all night; to which Miss Layel replied

that she had found a quiet corner in the drawing-room, and as she had forgotten how to dance she had preferred remaining there to entering the gallery and getting into the way of people's feet.

"I daresay you have been making your observations," said Miss Cranmer slyly. "If you had come here earlier, you would have found something worth watching too."

A scarcely perceptible frown wrinkled Miss Layel's forehead for a moment, but she made no response, and Miss Cranmer began to talk rather largely, as it seemed to me, but still in a half-confidential manner, of her extensive acquaintance in town, and during the next twenty minutes we heard more of the ways and customs of polite society than we were either of us likely to see as long as we lived. Miss Cranmer professed to know everybody, to have met everybody, to have spoken to everybody who was anybody; or if she had not been personally intimate with a few isolated individuals of distinction, she was acquainted with their first-cousins, uncles, aunts, or grandmothers, who had often and often told

her all about them. She was very familiar, indeed, with great names and, of course, she tripped now and then on a mistake. Miss Layel was not insensible to the humorous, and it was probably in a spirit of sarcasm that she suggested to Miss Cranmer to set up a folio journal and become a feminine Boswell to all the famous and talented people she admired. Miss Cranmer confessed to keeping something of that nature, and intimated that it contained a store of personal anecdotes well worth preservation, and then she asked Miss Layel if she had a wide acquaintance with celebrated people, to which Miss Layel replied, No, she knew nobody.

“If I had your opportunities I would not have that to say long,” rejoined Miss Cranmer, but as Miss Layel was not responsive, she reverted to her amusing gossip about the people around us. She told us that Miss Theodora Bousfield had been engaged for years to Dr. Julius Eden, but that his uncle did not like the match, as she was, *at least*, eight years his senior; and so it had been put off, from time to time, until some of their friends thought it would never take place



at all. She informed us of the nature and amount of Mr. Barstow's property on what she called *the best authority*, and gave us to understand that Captain Willoughby and his wife lived in anything but harmony—all of which intelligence, we discovered in process of time to be utterly devoid of foundation—but it beguiled the tedious hours of society to hear it, and as I make a practice of never believing roundabout gossip, which it is perfectly easy to do, there was not much harm in it perhaps; I was not sorry, however, when Ursula came up to me and announced that she was ready to go home. "If I dance any more it must be with that odious little Fortuner," said she in an angry undertone; "and I would rather *die* than stand up with him again."

So we said good-night to Miss Cranmer and Miss Layel, and went in search of Miss Pegge Burnell for the same purpose; but we were told by Dr. Eden that, under his orders, she always quietly disappeared after supper, and left her guests to entertain themselves and each other, until they were tired and chose to disperse; which he considered it was now full time to do, as it

was between two and three o'clock of the morning. He offered his arm to lead me to our carriage (every vehicle in Redcross is a *carriage*), and as we were descending the steps from the inner to the outer hall with Ursula following, a scurry of hasty steps overtook us, and I heard the Fortuner's breathless voice gasping, "Miss Ursula, are you *really* going? permit me—great disappointment—Sir Roger—promise myself—pleasure—Mr. Fletcher—to-morrow."

"Did the man mean to say that he intended calling on papa to-morrow?" cried Ursula in angry consternation as we were driving off.

I replied that I had understood him so.

"I am sure papa does not want him," retorted she pettishly; "he knows none of the usages of society; how rude he was to Dr. Julius Eden—he ought to have taken notice of it. I had three dances with Dr. Julius—you cannot think, Doris, how nicely he holds his partner in a galop. I wish the Edens would call on papa—they are worth knowing—but I shall never encourage the Fortuner. I shall take care to be out of the way to-morrow, and mind, Doris, you don't tell

anybody at home about my ridiculous exhibition with him—if you do I will never forgive you.”

Thus admonished, I kept a discreet silence when Ursula the next morning gave papa, mamma and Connie a flourishing account of the most delightful party she had ever been at in her life; from which account were omitted all mortifying reminiscences of the Fortuner, while the civilities of Dr. Julius Eden were made even more than the most of. She said nothing of Miss Pegge Burnell's ungente remarks on Connie's absence, but much of her own thorough enjoyment in all she had seen and done; and had I not been present to witness to the contrary, I should have believed that the evening from first to last had been for her one uninterrupted scene of triumph, success and delight.

## XV.

## SHADOWS AT HOME.

URSULA had stated her intention of getting out of the way at the time Mr. Barstow might be expected to call on papa, but when it came to the point she changed her mind and remained all day about the house, taking her constitutional in the garden instead of over the down with Connie and myself. And much she congratulated herself afterwards on having done so, for though the Fortuner made his appearance and behaved as absurdly as it was in his power to do, he had not taken his leave more than five minutes when Dr. Eden and his nephew called to pay an initiatory visit.

Ursula was loud and eager in the praises of both.

“You cannot think how agreeable Dr. Julius

is when you have him to yourself, and the old gentleman is perfectly delightful!" said she. "They looked at my Turk's head and admired it extremely; and is it not curious? they know all mamma's Scotch connections!" She also contrived to be papa's companion when he returned the call, by persuading mamma that it was too cold for her to go out, and by representing to papa that the frost must have made the road down to Scarcliffe so slippery that it would not be safe for him to venture abroad without her arm to lean upon. Everybody knew the meaning and the value of this considerateness, but it was permitted to pass unquestioned, and she put on her most becoming bonnet and cloak with great care for the occasion; but unfortunately all her pains were thrown away, for neither Dr. Eden nor Dr. Julius happened to be at home.

At this period Ursula dropt her idea of taking a situation and frankly admitted that living in the country was much pleasanter than she could have imagined. After Miss Pegge Burnell's *omnium gatherum* many more people called upon

us; amongst others Mr. Foxley, Mr. Stewart, Dr. Bousfield and Miss Theodora, Mrs. and Miss Cranmer, Captain and Mrs. Willoughby, and Mrs. Braithwaite. Ursula and myself went out frequently to entertainments of very various kinds. Dr. Bousfield had musical evenings once a fortnight, and at his house we always met the Edens and what Ursula designated "the set with brains." Mrs. Willoughby gave private theatricals, carpet dances with a great deal of dust, and a stand-up supper for ten to forty people. Mrs. Cranmer had chatty small tea-parties, where people were carefully selected in harmonious groups, and Mrs. Braithwaite gave serious entertainments with Mr. Foxley for the main element of amusement.

It was a matter of serious discussion how we should return the hospitality of our acquaintance, but, at last, papa ruled that there was but one way to do it, consistently with our means and small accommodation—we must dine at six o'clock instead of two once a week, and invite three or four persons each time until we had paid our debts. Ursula did not like the plan at all; she



wanted to turn the house out of window and have a regular dance in the dining-room, but mamma and nurse Bradshaw stood firm against any such domestic revolution.

“You may ask people to friendly dinners if you choose, but it is my opinion that they will not come,” Ursula said.

But the event proved her mistaken, for the first invitations were very cordially accepted by Mr. and Mrs. Maurice, their younger daughter and Mr. Stewart. We engaged the village baker—according to Redcross custom—to relieve nurse Bradshaw of the waiting at table, and papa produced some of his reserved store of the choice wines which had made his Roseberry hospitality famous amongst his friends. The evening went off cheerfully and pleasantly; so much so, indeed, that Ursula recanted her former opinions, and was ready to declare that quiet little dinners were the most delightful of all forms of social enjoyment.

There was another family debate before the next invitations were written as to who ought to receive them; but it ended in Dr. Bousfield

and Miss Theodora being invited to meet Dr. Eden and his nephew.

“And if Connie would consent to dine in the middle of the day, which at her age would be much more proper, we might have Miss Pegge, Burnell too,” Ursula suggested.

“I don’t care about it—I will not dine at all if you like,” replied Connie cheerfully; and Miss Pegge Burnell was asked accordingly, but declined on the plea of not being well enough, so Connie’s place was still left open for her.

Ursula evidently regarded this second quiet little dinner as of much greater importance than the former one, and her interference and dictation in all relating to it were very trying to the rest of us. She testified more disappointment at Miss Pegge Burnell’s refusal than the occasion seemed to deserve, and tried to interpolate Mrs. Braithwaite in her stead; but to this mamma would not consent, and being contradicted she lost her temper and became imperative with Connie, for no reason that anybody could discover.

“Connie, you will not wear that pink spotted muslin again that you wore when the Maurice

were here," began she irrelevantly. "It is quite a morning dress."

"Oh, it does not signify, as I am not out," replied Connie in some surprise. "You found no fault before,—I like it, and it fits me so easily. Besides I have nothing else except my thick merino."

"You have your checked silk, and that is much more suitable; your pink muslin is quite out of character at a dinner-party."

"But I have grown out of my checked silk," persisted Connie; "it is above my ankles, and it is so short-waisted I cannot breathe in it."

Papa had been listening to this brief dispute, and now he bade Connie run away and put on the silk attire, adding with a quizzical glance at Ursula,—

"And if mamma pronounces against it you shall trot down into Scarccliffe with me, and I'll buy you something new."

"There are many things much more wanted in the house than new evening dresses for Connie!" Ursula said indignantly, but Connie obeyed papa, and presently reappeared amongst

us as much disfigured as it was possible for her to be while possessing in her own person every imaginable girlish grace. Papa and mamma both laughed irresistibly as she danced in before them, and papa said,—

“The little one is taller than either of you two, girls; she is just her mother’s height, and that is the height of the beauty of the world—the Florentine Venus—I did not think, my dear, you could have looked such a *fright*—that is the feminine word, is it not? There, go away—something new is indispensable—don’t you agree with me, mamma?”

“The pink muslin would have done very nicely,” said mamma.

“And this silk will do very nicely too,” interrupted Ursula. “Come here, Connie, I am sure it can be altered.”

Connie drew near with arch submission and allowed herself to be manipulated in the outgrown garment, while Ursula cleverly demonstrated how, by letting down the skirt, putting in a band and a false hem down the back it could be made all that was desirable. “Take

it off and bring it to me and I will set about doing it for you at once," she magnanimously concluded.

"What say you, mamma?" papa asked dubiously.

"I think Connie must wear her pink muslin again. That old silk has done its duty and owes no one service; but it is not of much use to buy her anything fresh at present when she goes nowhere and has not, perhaps, done growing."

"Oh! yes, mamma, I have done growing: nurse measured me only the last week and I am exactly the same as I was six months ago," Connie assured her. "But I would rather have a new dress in spring than now, and I am sure nobody but Ursie will ever fidget about what I wear."

So Connie appeared in the pink muslin and looked, as she could not help looking, very, very lovely. Dr. Eden, who had a great eye for feminine attractions, assured me that in a few years she would be that great rarity, "a perfectly beautiful woman;" and Dr. Julius, who always had a wilful way of trying to do what he liked, irrespective of duty, took her into dinner because

she was "the little one," though it had been prearranged amongst us that he should escort Ursula.

Ursula afterwards made this a plea for complaint to me against Connie's manners.

"You see how she does—she smiles and blushes and looks up with her pretty eyes for all the world like a child," began she; "it really is time for her to be told, if she cannot perceive it for herself, that there is a *certain something* expected in women beyond that. And the men are quite ready to make a fool of her, with their flattering air of delighting in all she says and does. She might be a duchess from the deference those two old doctors paid her to-night, and papa was almost as bad;—I declare it was a perfect farce to watch them; if they had behaved so to me I should have thought they were mocking me!"

"If Connie is lovely, she cannot help it," said I, vexed at such unreasonable nonsense: "and surely you would not have her less modest? I suppose nature has endowed her with that peculiar fascination which she denies altogether to some



of us and which no arts and striving can win; and she can no more divest herself of it than she can change the shape of her nose or the colour of her hair. I know men admire her—and I think them the best judges of what is admirable in women after all, Ursie, though it is a positive pleasure to me too to look at her sweet, happy, innocent, beautiful face!”

“Do you!” retorted Ursula with great scorn; “well, she provokes *me!* and she would provoke any one who was a degree less infatuated with her than yourself. You cannot see a fault she has.”

“Yes, I can see that she is impatient occasionally, and wilful often, and disposed to be careless still oftener,” returned I; “but I cannot see that the reverential admiration of two old gentlemen is to be imputed to her as blame, or that it would be wise to drill her prematurely out of her childlike ways because Dr. Julius appeared to think her a nice little thing. She will learn to feel like a woman all in good time, and the manners of one will follow in due course; but, for the present, she will do very well as she is.”

"I don't agree with you," said Ursula decisively; "but if her head is to be turned, remember it cannot be charged upon me; for if I had my way she should be sent to school for the next year and a half."

I promised to bear the unnecessary warning in mind, but just then Connie coming in to look for me, Ursula asked her abruptly, "Connie, did any of the gentlemen who were here last night tell you you were charming?"

Connie opened a pair of amazed eyes and exclaimed, "What do you mean, Ursie? of course they did not! I should have thought it very rude if they had, and not at all charming in them."

"There! you see she is old enough to perceive what would be an impertinence if put into so many words!" cried Ursula regarding me triumphantly. "Though you *do* fancy her so childlike, she knows already that it is not the usage of good society for men to compliment the women they respect with frivolous speeches. But the far more subtle flattery of their manner to her she passes by."

Connie looked puzzled and asked indefinitely what it was all about? I told her it was all about nothing.

“No, it is not all about nothing, it is all about a matter of the highest importance,” interposed Ursula with dignity. “It is about your way of demeaning yourself towards gentlemen.”

Connie blushed painfully, and with an appealing look at me, wanted to know what she had done that she ought not to have done? I said, “Nothing,” but Ursula took up the word and answered, “You have a trick of putting yourself forward; you laugh and talk as if you were somebody, and you are as vain a little minx as you used to be at Roseberry when you always climbed upon the gentlemen’s knees to show your new shoes.”

“I did not climb upon gentlemen’s knees, it was they who ran after me and caught me!” said Connie indignantly. “And if you want to make me always stop to consider what they may think of me now before I speak, you will not succeed, Ursie! I could not do it if I would and I would not if I could—and I wish you would let me alone.” Connie seemed very much as if further

lecturing would bring her to tears, so I advised her to go away and not mind.

"I can't help minding," said she more gently. "I am sure papa and mamma would soon call me to order if they saw I needed it, and I do not think Ursie has any right to tease me. People seem to like me as well as they like her, and they would not do it if I had really forward manners—I cannot always be keeping guard over myself, I forget."

"You are under a disadvantage in having been released from schoolroom discipline too early," said Ursula. "If Miss Heywood had been here last night, you would not have been in the drawing-room half an hour and you would have gone to bed at nine o'clock."

Connie sighed and looked disconsolate for a moment, but on second thoughts, she threw that feeling to the winds, and said with more determination than I had ever given her credit for, "Ursie, I will not let you make me angry, but I do think you talk ill-natured nonsense to me. I know what is right and wrong as well as you do."

"You are very wise in your own conceits I daresay," retorted Ursula; "and quite too dignified in your maiden modesty for any person to venture on taking a liberty with you."

Connie's cheeks were crimson and her eyes ominously bright between tears and vexation as she replied, "You are unkind, Ursie; and I don't think I understand half you mean; but I am sure I would not allow any one to approach me with the easy insolence of that Mr. Tom Claridge, who came up to talk to you at the library the last time we were in Searcliffe! You might have known him all your life instead of having only met him once before. I thought him intolerably presuming and familiar, and I wondered at your suffering him to speak to you as he did; I am sure that if papa had been within hearing, you would not have dared to encourage such an odious person!"

"Very childlike sentiments, indeed!" sneered Ursula, with a significant glance at me. "She perceives that Mr. Tom Claridge is not a nice person, and she perceives correctly; but how, being such an innocent child, does she contrive to do it?"

Connie replied that he had a rude way of staring, "and," added she, "of *complimenting* you, Ursie. He told you in less than ten minutes that you were clever, witty, arch, sarcastic, and blooming."

"Little pitchers *have* long ears!" interrupted Ursula angrily. "If Mr. Tom Claridge had been in Dr. Julius Eden's place last night, you would have chattered to him just as much as you did to Doctor Julius."

"No, I should only have been intent on getting out of his way; but papa would never ask such a man within his doors," was Connie's answer. "I know nothing about him, and I never saw him before or heard his name, but I took an antipathy to him at first sight. You have seen him, Doris; is he a good kind of man?"

"No," replied I; "he is the kind of man for whom a pure-minded woman would feel an instinctive repulsion; there is no need to inquire into the metaphysics of the feeling, Connie, but you may rely upon its being correct; Mr. Tom Claridge is undoubtedly a person to be avoided."

"Well, I declare!" cried Ursula passionately,



“of all the unreasonable trash I ever listened to, that is about the worst. You have seen the man *once* at a respectable house, he is of good family, a barrister of great repute and learning, and just because he has an impertinent trick of staring and a rather free way of speaking, you two dare to set him down as a person of no character at all!”

Connie walked away out of the room without speaking any more, and I was silent too; it was of no use reasoning with Ursula when she was in one of her unreasonable moods; she would misrepresent our words and exaggerate them, and when she got angry it was always expedient to drop the subject in dispute and leave her the last word. On this occasion, however, she continued to preach and moralize so long and so wearily over Connie's delinquencies and my foolish blindness to them, that I was, at last, provoked to say, “Ursula, the plain English of all this nonsense is, that you see Connie receiving, without effort and without triumph, a tribute of affection and admiration which you, dress, dance, study, struggle as you

may, will never win! You are envious of her beauty, and jealous of her success, and if you go on much longer as you have done ever since our first party at Redcross, your envy and jealousy will soon become as evident to every one else as they are to me!"

I was half struck with compunction when the words had passed my lips, but they were *true*, and I was not then in the mood to temporize. Ursula stared at me with astonishment for some moments, and then she began to whimper and to say with spurious pathos that my feelings towards her were unsisterly. I would make neither recantation nor concession, and by degrees, she worked herself up into a fit of tears and went down to dinner ostentatiously wiping her eyes. Of course, mamma inquired what was amiss, and she forthwith burst into a roar, declared I had used her shamefully, and then rushed out of the room and back upstairs. Mamma looked distressed, and would have followed her with consolations, but papa only put up his eyebrows and bade her sit still.

"The girls talk with their door open, and Ursie

speaks too loud to keep secrets," said he ; " I was upstairs while the feminine parliament was sitting, and heard the members on both sides the house—if the temper and folly of the honourable member who has just retired evaporate at her eyes, so much the better." Papa spoke in a tone of sarcastic annoyance, and as mamma looked to him for further explanation, he gave it. " Ursula is hard on the little one and finds fault with her manners, which are very pretty manners so far as I can judge—the little one turns the tables on Ursula, and Doris backs her, then there is a battle royal. The little one, esteeming prudence the better part of valour, beats a retreat; then Ursula attacks her remaining opponent tooth and nail; the opponent waits her opportunity, and concentrates all her force into one blow, which prostrates the assailant ignominiously in the dust she has been at such pains to raise."

"It is very wrong to quarrel, children," said mamma reprovingly; "and very vulgar too. You know Ursula cannot bear contradiction, so you should try to put up with her."

"Don't forget that lesson, my dears," added

papa; "in studying it you will learn humility and self-negation in the first degree."

Mamma shook her head at him as much as to say he was encouraging us, but I think he afterwards recounted to her the substance of what he had overheard, for she said to me, "Doris, it is a pity you charged Ursula with being envious and jealous of Connie—I am sorry to see there is a little of both in her temper, but it is not always wise to hurl such unpalatable truths at your relations. They cannot be unsaid, and they are rarely forgotten. Ursula's words do not count for much when she is angry, but as you have more self-command and generally speak in cool blood, what you *say* carries weight as being what you *think*. Ursula sees that you distrust her and take Connie's part on all occasions; there ought to be no need to take parts amongst sisters, but if any more of these little differences of opinion arise, let them be referred to me. Ursula must not be allowed to stimulate Connie's ideas by such nonsense as she addressed to her to-day, and of that both her father and I have assured her; but she will bear no check

from you, because you are too nearly her equal in age and experience; and to attempt it only ends in exasperating her further and perpetuating the envenomed state of feeling. I am sure, Doris, you do not desire to raise dissension at home, and it is a thing shocking to me, to contemplate; so be still, my dear, and when Ursie is unreasonable let her say her say."

Mamma was right, of course, but it was not easy to attain to such angelical ways of acting with Ursula. She chose to intimate that she had gained a triumph over me in persuading mamma to give me this little admonition, and the triumph was, to say the least of it, provoking. But I contrived to endure it in silence, and tried to persuade myself that it was the silence of contempt, but I believe that I should dearly have liked to speak and get the victory again on my own side.

## XVI.

## REFLECTIVE.

SINCE accident laid me on my back and decreed that henceforward I should only contemplate life from an horizontal point of view, I have seen many things in aspects which, perhaps, they never could have borne to my eyes had I always looked at them from a perpendicular position. Having no more calls to action, no pressure of external duties, no anxiety about to-morrow, the mind has a tendency to subside, by degrees, into the same quiescent attitude as the body, and ceases to fret and fume over the thousand and one little fidgets that used to make such a vexatious turmoil of its busier estate.

My old Thought-Book contains many a line, many a page, that shames me now for the feeble worry that penned them. Could I ever have



made so much ado about nothing? could I ever have let my mind go to pieces for days on petty annoyances like these that I have recorded? Was my quiet broken up so often by a gust of adverse temper, and were my little means of amusement made of none effect whenever a tiny provocation came in my way? The old Thought-Book compels me to answer, 'Yes,' to all these questions. I could bear a great trial with more patience than I could bring to the encounter of minute vexations, and these out-of-date annals witness that I really suffered more in the aggregate from my sister Ursula's peculiarities than I did from our loss of Roseberry.

I believe many persons to be in similar case. A sharp attack of inflammation is bad to bear, but a chronic crick in the neck would be worse in the long run; the extraction of a pet wisdom-tooth is a test of courage, but I would rather have a pet wisdom tooth out once a week than suffer its gnawing pangs for the one hundred and sixty-eight hours that would make up the interval between each wrench. Ursula was the metaphorical crick in my neck and the meta-

phorical nerve in my tooth without the alternative of being blistered or pincered away. She had a tact, an ingenuity, a persistency in putting me out which no other person ever possessed. I tried to reason myself into a passive state of mind on this subject often, but never, while we were young, to any purpose. I was not quarrelsome with other people, but I was perfectly conscious of a restless spirit of antagonism in my heart towards her which a trifle would cause to spurt up in flame.

As children in the nursery, she took the higher hand and kept it; nurse Bradshaw's name for her was "Mistress Uppercrust;" in the schoolroom it was the same. She was much quicker, cleverer, more persevering than myself; but her ambition was not my ambition, and I was not jealous, perhaps because I was not emulous. She had so thoroughly assumed and decided that she was the daughter of talent and that I was a slow girl, that her idea became the generally received idea of the whole house, and I acquiesced in it like everybody else. Papa was the only person of the family who ever ventured on the suggestion

that I could possibly be her equal in mental capacity, but it did not alter Ursula's estimate of her own superiority one iota.

Perhaps this serene sense of elevation was the main source of her powers of irritation. It is not pleasant to be sneered down even as a child, and later in life the ordeal becomes still more grievous. True humility bears it beautifully, of course, but we are most of us a long while in attaining to that heavenly temper, and, meantime, we are naturally given to revolt. And besides this obtrusively ruffling propensity, Ursula had another which was almost equally vexatious. If an argument was going against her, she stopt it short of its climax by a flood of tears; when, for the life of me, I could not help undergoing all the wretched sensations of being in the wrong, even though I knew myself to be absolutely in the right. From that phase she would take refuge in airs of martyrdom, provokingly pathetic to witness, which made everybody silent and miserable. So long as Miss Heywood was with us, every now and then, she was signally defeated and compelled to lay by her injured tone as too

ridiculously false to be maintained; but at Red-cross there was no longer that plain-spoken, fearless woman, with her invincible sense of justice, to put her down, and in fighting my own and Connie's battles it nearly always happened that I came off worsted.

So the old Thought-Book was made the confidant of our paltry troubles, and here they rise again to show me my own weakness and inconsistency at almost every line, quite as forcibly as they record her jealous spirit of domineering, her determination to be the most important figure in the family, and her annoying persistence in being always in the right.

I never from my earliest recollection heard Ursula admit that she might have been mistaken or could have done wrong. Her principles were the most correct—her views the most enlarged—her wishes of the first importance—her opinions of greatest weight; any one who did not implicitly believe in her was prejudiced and, therefore, unworthy of her consideration; and as I could neither believe in her nor pretend I did, we often came to open quarrel. In those days I was young,

strong and full of will too, and so she vexed me sharply again and again, and conquered me again and again, and triumphed over me again and again, and on the next occasion I returned to the warfare as keenly as ever.

But *now* all our little points of contention heaped together are not worth a serious thought. Ursula might figuratively tower on stilts a head above me and I should not care; she might patronize me with her stores of useful knowledge, and I would listen as patiently as to a sermon; she might lay down whole codes of law about my sofa, and I would not lift a finger to break through one of them; she might talk of herself by the hour together in a rasping, exalted voice, and I would only shut my eyes and try to doze; she might slam the doors or leave them standing wide to let in all the draughts, and I would make no complaint. But it is not any virtue of humility, or resignation, or patience that has brought me to this quiet pass—it is something quite as powerful over human actions though it has nothing to do with human motives—in short it is *necessity*. I cannot help myself,

and my condition has led me to the discovery that it is more comfortable to be weak under absolute despotism than it is to be strong under wavering tyranny.

At this day when Ursula revisits Redcross, I bend my neck voluntarily to her yoke and give in as meekly to her laws as if we were children again in the nursery at Roseberry. She says I have learnt, at last, to see her in her proper light and to do her character justice; but during that first year of our residence at Redcross I was a long way from having attained to this measure of understanding, and so it came to pass that, even after mamma's grave admonition, I was again very shortly at war with her as to which of us must go to old aunt Maria in the spring, for the six weeks' visit which one or another of us had annually paid her since we were ten years old. It was not a change we any of us desired, but I was willing to go; Ursula was for despatching Connie, and Connie, on her part, desired to evade the penalty—for such, I remember, we then thought it.

Aunt Maria was papa's eldest sister; she was



a single woman, and lived on a small income in one of the least attractive and dullest villages I ever saw. She kept one servant, who had been with her for thirty years, and the rules of her house were of almost Spartan rigour. If she laid it down as a rule that the season of the year was come to take exercise at a stated time of day, out at that hour and no other must we go, whether it rained or shone. She was literally parsimonious in her own expenditure that she might have the more to give away, and her invaluable Nancy aided and abetted her in all her saving devices. Work she would allow none but plain work; all books that were not of a strictly instructive tendency were forbidden her shelves, and company of her own class never entered her doors. Ursula had once spent six months with her, as a change after the scarlet fever, and she looked back upon that epoch with unfeigned disgust, always raising it when spring came round, as a plea why she should be excused going again—a plea that had now for several years been successful.

On this occasion, however, when the business

came on for discussion, papa asked, "Why should you not go yourself, Ursie? Your aunt Maria has not seen you since you were fourteen."

"Oh, indeed, papa, I won't go, just when I have begun to like Redcross; I shall think it a shame if I am sent," was her hasty reply. "There is no reason in the world why Connie should not take her turn—Doris was there last year."

Connie said nothing, but she looked very dismal, so I announced my readiness to go. I had my motive in it; I wanted to judge of poor aunt Maria's lonely life, since my own was fated to emulate it in its solitariness. I had heard papa say that she had not always been the same as she was now, and I was grown interested to learn how she contrived to be content, and even happy, with none of the visible appliances of happiness about her.

But Ursula persisted that it was Connie's turn, and the decision was not reached then nor until after several more debates; but, at last, the bright idea struck us that if we *both* went, the visit might be made almost pleasant; Ursula found nothing to say against that, but even caught at

the proposition with eagerness, saying, "Why should we not! it was a good thought,"—and neither papa nor mamma raising any objection, during the last week in April, Connie and I left home together in better spirits than any of us had ever gone to aunt Maria before.

## XVII.

## AUNT MARIA'S HOUSEHOLD.

ABERFORD was the name of the retired midland county village where aunt Maria had seen fit to locate herself. It was a long day's journey from Redcross, and when we arrived at our destination it was almost night. Dusk though it was, however, I saw that the house had undergone rather extensive alterations and additions, since my visit in the spring of the previous year, of which we had heard nothing at home; indeed, at first, I thought that the cabman must have made a mistake and brought us to the wrong place, until Connie said, no, there was aunt Maria standing in the doorway and Nancy arriving from the kitchen with her candle.

Upon that we got out and walked up the garden path, vainly speculating on the visible

changes in the house, until aunt Maria met us on the threshold and gave us a welcome in her kindly, formal way. She led us into the well-known parlour for a few minutes till Nancy, having carried our luggage to our room upstairs, brought a light and intimated that we might as well go too, and then we should be comfortably ready for our tea by the time our tea was ready for us. Aunt Maria accompanied us, and having put down the candle and seated herself to wait while we took off our travelling wraps and rearranged our dress, she remarked on Connie's growth, made a few inquiries about those we had left at home, and then proceeded to explain the puzzle of her enlarged premises.

"Children," she began, "you will find I have increased my establishment since you were here last—you will see two ladies at tea, strangers to you, of whose peculiarities you must be as inobservant as possible. I found my income larger than my necessities or my means of usefulness in Aberford, and the charge of these afflicted persons supplies me with continual work and interest. One of them is the daughter of a former

friend of our family, the other is a lady of education who, in losing her mind, lost all power of self-support. Had not I received her she must have been removed either to the county pauper asylum or to the district workhouse, for her crotchets had become too troublesome to be borne with longer by the family where she was for many years employed as governess. I tell you this that you may not be taken by surprise. You have too much courage and too high a sense of propriety, I trust, to betray any annoyance or groundless alarm."

So we had come to Aberford to enjoy the cheerful society of two lunatics in addition to that of aunt Maria and old Nancy! The announcement dismayed me very considerably, and poor Connie already began to tremble and change colour by anticipation. Aunt Maria had much more confidence in us than we had in ourselves, for we both entertained a terror of insane persons, neither uncommon nor unnatural, I believe; and to be domesticated with a couple of mad women for six weeks was a trial which neither of us would voluntarily have encountered had we known



what awaited us before we left home. But here we were, and as it was decidedly a stretch beyond our daring to express our feelings to aunt Maria, we had nothing to do but to hold them in panting check, to be as long over dressing as we could, and finally to follow her downstairs in a suppressed state of apprehensive expectancy. Nancy was just on the point of coming to hasten us when we appeared in the rear of aunt Maria, and as she opened the door of a new room which had been built for the accommodation of the patients, she said :

“ Mistress, you’d better be quick, or I shouldn’t wonder if Sofona’s at the cream again ; ” which suggested that the family had been further increased by a cat, but turned out to mean only that the lesser of aunt Maria’s charges had a weakness for the contents of the ewer when not under proper surveillance.

As we entered, this poor Sofona jumped up from a seat by the guarded fire and ran towards us with lively expressions of joy at our arrival, on which aunt Maria introduced us in due form by our Christian names, and then the brisk little

body set chairs for us by the tea-table and opined that we must be hungry after our long journey—a most just and sensible remark, which dissipated a little of our quaking awe and placed us more nearly on a level. Her companion in misfortune took no notice of the bustle, but sat drooping on the floor, her arms clasped round her knees and her chin on her breast, until aunt Maria touched her on the shoulder, when she looked up, smiling and vacant, like a grey-headed child; she took hold of aunt Maria's gown and put it to her lips, and then reverted to her former attitude, from which she did not stir again until Nancy brought in the urn; when she rose slowly and trailed herself to a seat by the tray at aunt Maria's elbow and then sat watching her face with a placid, reliant affectionateness very pathetic to witness. When Nancy supplied her with bread and butter, however, she began to eat with great eagerness and enjoyment, while Sofona minced and nibbled in the most airified manner, breaking forth every now and then into renewed expressions of satisfaction at our safe arrival. On the whole, the aspect of this queer little family party was

much less terrible in reality than it had appeared by anticipation.

Aunt Maria, ever since we could remember her, had lived like a nun, all but the vows, and as she now sat in a great chair at the head of the table in a black cloth gown and close-crimped net, quakerish cap, she looked not unlike one. In figure and in features she must once have strongly resembled Connie, but now a gentle austerity was the prevalent expression of her countenance; she looked hale and active for her years, and had still a wintry rose of complexion, but the form and set of her mouth showed as much determination as tenderness, and the quiet penetration of her eyes intimated a sagacity that would not easily be hoodwinked. She had been a very formidable person to all of us from our babyhood upwards; not that she was harsh or severe, but that she preached and practised such awfully strict rules of duty and self-denial, and, in her own house, enforced them upon her little visitors. Never had any of us, not even Ursula, ventured on open revolt, bitter as might have been our secret murmurs at being driven into the exercise of the

noblest Christian virtues against our wills. If our hearts had been in our work, we might have claimed canonization as premature ascetics and ultimate saints; but they never were.

I recollect with the distinctness which always attends an acute disappointment, the first dinner I ever ate under aunt Maria's roof: it happened to be one of her lenten days, and lenten days came round there three times a week; the first dish was broad beans to be eaten only with salt—fare which by no means approved itself to my dainty Roseberry palate—but after that was removed by me untouched, Nancy brought in a sago-pudding, puffed, brown, crisp, which promised a moderate degree of satisfaction, and on that my eyes and mind settled for a few calm moments of anticipatory content. Aunt Maria took up a spoon, poised it for a second and laid it down again, saying to Nancy in the most matter-of-fact way in the world:

“No, we will not eat it, it looks so light, we will carry it to those poor children at the Ford who are recovering from the measles. Doris,

if you are still hungry you shall have a slice of brown bread and a cup of milk."

So I ate my brown bread in dissatisfied silence, and took credit for a self-denial which I was much too hungry to have practised had I been left to choose; that was the way aunt Maria acquired her power over us; she assumed that all beautiful virtues, thoughts, and wishes came naturally to us as to her, made us enact them, and implied her approval of our behaviour so kindly, that for very shame we dare not assert our propensity to be as selfish, greedy, and naughty as other little people. We carried that pudding to the children at the Ford, and I hope and believe it did them good; it was by no means the last disappointment of a similar kind that I was called upon to bear during my visits to aunt Maria in their behalf.

Last year I had found her appropriating the largest room in her house as a temporary nursery for sick children, but the poor in Aberford were not very numerous, and this source of employment failing her just at the time when poor Sofona was about to be thrown friendless and helpless

on the world, she had taken the sudden resolution of devoting her superfluous charities to her and one other lady afflicted in the same degree; so, in fact, she afterwards explained her reasons and her manner of undertaking what appeared to me a most arduous and anxious task. With a view to carrying out her designs in the ablest way, she had added to her small old-fashioned cottage two larger rooms one above the other, and in the lower of these it was that we were now drinking tea in company with her poor charges. It was a long room in which both the reality and the appearance of luxury had been utterly repudiated. The floor, the mantel-piece, the furniture, were all of dark varnished pitch-pine, the windows were uncurtained, the boards uncarpeted, the walls were papered with glazed sea green, cool and clouded; but there was a plant stand which made a brilliant spot of colour with its primulas, tulips, and hyacinths; there were cages of birds, now covered up and gone to roost, and there was—thing unheard of in aunt Maria's house before—a piano standing open and with music on the desk. I afterwards discovered that



there was light literature too, Sofona was a novel reader, and I am sure aunt Maria must have had a sharp contest with her principles, and perhaps with the medical adviser under whose directions she acted, before she yielded to such a subversion of all she considered profitable and right, as was implied by the introduction of *that* upon her grave and standard shelves.

Changes and yet more changes! When tea was over Sofona promptly produced a draught-board and challenged aunt Maria to a game; it was very well contested, and Sofona won. While this was in progress the other poor lady betook herself again to her favourite attitude upon the floor, from which she did not rise until about nine o'clock when Nancy came in for prayers. Sofona cried out tartly "too soon," but aunt Maria said "Hush," and the rebel subsided into silence. The ceremonial of prayers was much shorter than I remembered it formerly, but short as it was it was still almost too long for Sofona, who became fidgety with her feet and head, and had to be repeatedly admonished by a touch from Nancy that she was behaving amiss.

When all was over she rose up like a spring suddenly set free and exclaimed eagerly,—

“Conversation! let us have conversation,” but aunt Maria replied with quiet decision that there would be time enough for conversation on the morrow, but that now everybody was going to bed; and she dismissed Connie and me with orders to be downstairs in the morning for breakfast not later than eight o’clock.

## XVIII.

## EDITH AND SOFONA.

WHEN Connie and I found ourselves in the retirement of our own room, we began to have a talk over aunt Maria's new reading of her old lessons of duty. Her life was evidently given up to these two poor witless women; she had relinquished the peace and quietness and refined orderliness which used to be its prevalent atmosphere, for incessant anxiety, worry and work. Formerly we could see that monotonous as her existence appeared to us, she was, nevertheless, contented in it, and happy in her own way. If she had a hard day at the village school, or a long round amongst her old women pensioners, or a nursing visit to a sick room, she had still her own undisturbed home to return to for evening rest, her favourite books, her work and

her faithful Nancy. But by bringing these unfortunates to her fireside she had annihilated all privacy and independence; that game of draughts with Sofona had taken the place of her precious hours of reading, and the necessity of constant watchfulness over her patients must, we knew, destroy the mental serenity which had been like a soft evening sunshine to her declining days. I think we felt that though such devotedness might be beautiful it was above our sympathy; we could never go and do likewise, much as we might honour those who did; and we were speculating on what aunt Maria's early history might have to show by way of elucidating her present life, when there came a knock at our door and her voice asking; "Children, are you in bed yet?"

We were not, so we opened the door and she entered, looking, I thought, very tired and feeble. She sat down in the easy chair, and when I said I was sure she was overdoing herself, for she seemed almost worn off her feet, she replied; "Better rub out than rust out, Doris; there will be time enough to rest by and by."

After a little talk Connie asked if Sofona or the other lady were ever dangerous.

"No, I could not have charged myself with them if that had been the case," was the answer. "Sofona is fractious and impatient occasionally, and I should imagine that even when in full possession of her faculties, she must have been a vain, crotchety little woman, but she is controlled more easily than many children. As for poor Edith, she has no will at all; she eats and sleeps and warms herself at the fire, and is quite oblivious of all the miseries under the sun."

Connie asked if she had been all her life imbecile.

"Oh, no!" aunt Maria replied. "I can remember her a girl as pretty, cheerful and gay as yourself. A proud, high-spirited lassie as ever breathed she was—but who would believe it now?"

"And Sofona?" I inquired.

"I do not know that Sofona's malady can be traced back to any particular event or chain of events," was the reply; "she was very odd and

troublesome long before it declared itself in its present decided form. It is probably inherited; many members of her family have been at different times in seclusion. But Edith came of as sound and healthy a stock as any in England; it was just trouble that turned her brain, poor soul, and nothing else."

We wanted to learn her story, but aunt Maria said it was too long to tell us then, but we should hear it another time; and so she bade us good night once more and went away, turning back at the door to tell us that we should walk out after breakfast the next morning in the meadows that skirted the river; and therefore, we had better prepare ourselves by putting on our holland dresses and stoutest boots, as the grass would most probably be wet. And with that she went to her bed in the new long room where her two patients were already secured—night and day she was at their call, and never safe from their disturbance.

Poor old aunt Maria! I felt inexpressibly touched and sorry for her, and Connie said: "If she were a Roman Catholic, Doris, I should fancy



she was doing penance for some sin which only the sacrifice of a whole lifetime could atone for."

It was new to both of us to see her weak, to hear her admit that she was weary, and to feel that she was vaguely craving help and sympathy out of herself. I believe she felt the burden she had taken on her shoulders almost heavier than she could bear, and yet one which she could never cast off. I recollect that she once said to me that it was a *task* where all her other labours had been more or less a *pleasure*.

"But," she added conclusively, "when I undertook it, it seemed to me the one right thing to do, and I have never permitted myself to look forward to the issues of conscientious acts. Only I find myself often hoping and praying that my life may be prolonged beyond theirs; it would be very hard for me to die and for Sofona to go to the workhouse. Poor Edith has friends, but the care of her is a sad burden to those who have life to support and world's work to do; so I trust I may lay their heads to rest, both of them, before I go to my own."

Which humble desire was, in fact, granted her, but not for some years yet.

When we drew up our blind the next morning and looked out into the garden, the first person we saw was Sofona gathering violets under the sunny shelter of the wall. Connie rapped upon the glass, and caused her to look up, which she did with a shower of little nods, highly expressive of her satisfaction at the sight of us. We presently joined her, when she said with a puzzled air,—

“I have found so many of my ideas vanish next morning that I was afraid you might vanish too.” She then told us that aunt Maria was dressing Edith, that the violets were for herself, as she loved perfumes, and then, with an air of importance informed us that her newspaper was come, and that she was going to read what was happening in the world. When Nancy called us in to breakfast shortly after, we found her diligently poring over the leading article of a three days old *Times*, while Edith knelt to warm herself at the fire, and aunt Maria with much of the appearance of her old grave activity was

making two bowls of porridge ready for their eating.

Sofona abandoned her study with reluctance, when summoned to come to table, and peevishly interrupted aunt Maria's formula of asking a blessing by looking at Connie and exclaiming, irrelevantly, "A tragical young lady!" After that momentary ebullition of temper, however, she soon became pleasant again, and even conversational, when she had taken the edge off her appetite with a few spoonfuls of porridge. Aunt Maria was not discouraging, as she used to be when *we* were talkatively inclined, but on the contrary, she asked Sofona what news there was in the paper, and seemed to expect a sensible reply; but her charge was in crotchety mood, for she would only speak at her own time, and in her own way, and instead of vouchsafing any answer to the question from the head of the table, she turned to me in a pointed manner and begged to know if I was literary; to which I replied, "No, not at all."

"I am," said she with solemn assurance. "I was always literary; I always enjoyed the con-

versation of intellectual people. But I think the world has grown duller than it was ; so many persons have not two ideas to rub against each other, my memory is not what it was, but I know there were sensible people when I was young. Do you read ? Richy-Bochy—I have just furnished that admirable book in which Richy-Bochy occurs with the stocks, and the red umbrella.”

I foolishly suggested, “ Ricca-bocca.”

“ Ah ! *Ricca-bocca*,” echoed Sofona critically ; “ sound is a matter of taste. I prefer *Richy-Bochy*—it fills the mouth better.”

“ How do you like Mr. Pendennis, whose adventures you have in hand ? ” aunt Maria inquired.

“ He is a puppy—a *puppy*, but an uncommonly likely young person,” was the ready answer : “ George Warrington’s the man of *my* heart ! Lord ! if it were worth crying for anybody, I could cry for George ! I love him ; blacking his boots and cooking his chops, I love him ! I wish that odious wife of his were dead, but I adore him for having been infatuated enough to

marry her. But it is a desperate thing to see Laura so mismatched—I wonder whether they agree?”

I was glad to be able to assure her that they were a perfectly satisfactory couple according to the last accounts.

“Ah! but George would have suited her better,” persisted she; “George would have suited her better, I am sure of it. But it is no concern of mine—they must fight it out. Some folks marry without the ghost of a chance of being happy. There’s a deal of wickedness and misery in the world, but why need it get into books? Look at Randal Leslie and that *cat* Blanche Amory—what’s the good of *them*? Poison ’em, I say, and have done with ’em.”

While Sofona was chattering in this exuberant strain, her porridge was at a standstill, but being gently warned that it was growing cold and unpalatable, she returned to the business of the hour, emptied her bowl, and asked for her cup of tea.

“Are you sure you wish for it, Sofona?” aunt Maria mildly inquired. Sofona replied in

the affirmative, but when it was given to her she did not attempt to taste it, and whispered to me confidentially that she hated *drugs*. And this little pretence she went through regularly every breakfast time—invariably demanding tea and invariably leaving it untouched; but to cross her humour in that one particular was enough to put her out and make her perverse for the whole day.

We had prayers after breakfast, during which Sofona walked about, and when they were ended she spread her newspaper on the table, brought forward a desk, pens and ink, and established herself in aunt Maria's vacated chair with fussy demonstrations of going to be very busy. She admonished poor Edith, who had never once opened her lips, that she must be quiet and not talk, and then she began to scribble in vehement haste, by and by looking up to inform Connie and myself that she had a world of work to do. Her business was, however, shortly interrupted by Nancy putting her head into the room, and announcing in aunt Maria's name that it was time to go out.



"I shall not finish it if I live to be as old as Methusalem!" cried Sofona snappishly, but she laid by her pen, rose and went out to make ready for our walk, Edith following with her head on one side feebly smiling to herself.

A queer little group of women we were when we met in the garden, and started down the lane to the river-side. But Aberford was now grown accustomed to aunt Maria and her eccentricities, and we passed through the village without attracting the attention of even stray children. It was a bright, crisp morning, and the rimy hoar-frost still sparkled under the hedgerows, where the sun had not yet reached; but the slow river was creeping through the sedgy levels in the same lazy way as I had watched it creep during many a past and gone morning's walk, and not a feature of the scene looked different from what it had looked any time for the last dozen years.

I do not like a flat country any more than I like a country of savage and barren grandeur, but aunt Maria thought Aberford a pretty place,

and said there were a thousand things to be learnt in its lanes and fields, if I only had the mind to learn them. Perhaps I had not the mind, for I certainly never did learn them, and I was thankful we had pitched our own tent in a soft, undulating, varied district, where nature wore a garb of beauty every day; and our appreciation of it was not dependent on damp, weedy excursions after botanical specimens in ditches and marshes. We stayed out of doors for nearly two hours, and very long hours they were, with poor Sofona for my companion, talking intellectual conversation all the while, but at last aunt Maria gave the word to march homewards, and homewards we marched accordingly.

Coming in sight of the cottage, we saw a gentleman standing within the garden gate, apparently on the look-out for us; the moment we appeared he came down the lane to meet us, while Sofona announced sharply that it was Edith's brother.

"Is it, indeed?" said aunt Maria, who was short-sighted, and quickening her steps, while Connie and I retarded ours, she presently came

up with him, and a very cordial greeting was exchanged between them.

The stranger then looked at Edith, took her unresisting hand, and drew it through his arm, saying just as we approached within hearing,—

“It was my mother’s wish that I should come, she could not be satisfied unless I saw with my own eyes that the poor thing was not unhappy.”

“All times, places and people are alike to her, Paul,” aunt Maria replied; “happiness and unhappiness are unmeaning sounds to her ears. Give her food and fire, and she has all she knows how to enjoy. She is as quietly contented as a child.”

“She always was,” said he, and they walked back the rest of the way to the cottage in silence.

## XIX.

## AN OLD STORY.

As we were going indoors aunt Maria recollected us, and turning about, said,—

“These are two of my nieces, Paul; children, Mr. Westmore.”

With a hurried, abstracted air he bowed and stood aside to let us pass, and Connie and I immediately recognized in him the person who had put us in our way back to Redcross when we lost ourselves on the downs, and called to inquire at the lonely cottage in the hollow during that winter afternoon’s walk of which I have already spoken.

When we came to observe him more nearly we saw he was a man of five or six and thirty or thereabouts, with a neglected fine face, intel-

lectual and strong, but yet as if some strength had evaporated in morbidity, disappointment and discontent. His countenance bore the traces of hard thought, work, care and pain, and in his eyes, when lost in himself, there was a dreamy vagueness which gave him a distant resemblance to his poor sister.

He remained at the cottage through that day and a part of the next, during which Connie and I took possession of Sofona that he might be alone with Edith and aunt Maria; and a very crusty, consequential personage, indeed, we found our companion when released from the immediate control of aunt Maria's eye and authority. But on the third evening Mr. Westmore was gone home again, and we all gathered, as at first, round the tea-table in the long parlour; Edith betraying no more signs of sorrow that he had left her than she had betrayed of joy at his coming. When the nine o'clock dispersion to bed took place, aunt Maria managed to intimate to us, unobserved by the watchful Sofona, that *we* might sit up later if we wished; so we availed ourselves of the permission, and stayed

talking low over the fire until she rejoined us, which we expected she would do.

We had had no opportunity yet of going, in detail, through any of the momentous events which had happened amongst us since our last visit to Aberford; but aunt Maria would now have us begin and tell her, with minutest particulars, all we had done and suffered in the interval. Papa's ruin, the death of Philip Massey, the departure for Australia of the boys; the loss of friends; the sale of Roseberry; and the retiring to Redcross—she would spare us nothing; but the reader knows all we had to narrate, so I shall not repeat, but pass on to what she gave us of confidence on her own affairs in return. Connie was very desirous to hear the history of poor Edith's lost life, and the recounting of that led aunt Maria to touch upon several circumstances which will be further elucidated in the course of these quiet annals of our family.

She told us that Mr. Westmore the elder had been transported some fourteen or fifteen years before, for forging the name of my uncle Sibthorpe to a power of attorney for the sale



of certain stock which he had converted to his own uses ; his partner, Mr. Jonathan Halbutt, was implicated in the crime, divided the spoil, and shared the punishment ; *that*, said aunt Maria briefly, was the world's account of it ; but *her* view was widely different.

The affair made a great noise at the time, for frauds perpetrated by men of respectable education and position were less frequent then than they have unhappily become since, and the crime appeared the more flagrant on Mr. Westmore's part, because, besides being my uncle's man of business, he was also his intimate private friend ; their friendship dating from their being boys together at Shrewsbury school. Aunt Maria was on the closest terms with all the Westmore family for years before the dreadful charge fell upon its head ; she described Mr. Westmore himself as a rather negligent man in his profession, but of honourable principles, fine appearance, and most kindly disposition ; further, she said, that in his own person he despised luxury, and was more given to the pursuit of science than of money. Of Mr. Jonathan Halbutt she spoke as a showy,

clever, plausible person, but a knave ingrain, and on him, wholly and solely, she most conscientiously believed the onus of the crime to rest. An attempt was even made by Mr. Westmore's counsel to divert the charge to his partner, but it failed. Both were convicted, Mr. Westmore's sentence being transportation for life, Mr. Jonathan Halbutt's for fourteen years.

Aunt Maria's personal reminiscences of his family after he was sent abroad were most touching. She said they sank below the surface of decent society, which is one of the penalties of crime in this country, and fell into utter poverty. His wife, a fine high-spirited woman, was quite broken down by it, and its consequences were far from ending with her. He had three children. Paul, the eldest, was finishing his education at Oxford, preparatory to studying for the bar; Edith, who was engaged to a junior member of one of the first banking firms in London; and another son, Francis, who afterwards went to sea in some inferior capacity, and had been quite lost sight of by his family ever since. Edith was an uncommonly handsome, clever, attractive girl, and

passionately devoted to her father; the agony of his fate preyed upon her mind, her engagement was broken off, and the weight of misery was altogether too much for her to bear; she sank into a low way, and after much suffering became hopelessly imbecile.

Upon Paul had, at once, devolved the maintenance of his mother and sister. He left the university, and his prospects were irretrievably blighted; his previous training was now all but useless to him, and he had difficulty even in obtaining an inferior clerkship. He was a young man of excellent ability and of proudly sensitive temper. He had much to go through. Aunt Maria alluded to an early attachment of his which came to an untimely end like his poor sister's: she told us that after holding his first situation a few months he was suddenly discharged on its being found out whose son he was. After that he took the post of usher in a school, gave lessons in the classics; acted as a reporter on the press; and, in fact, exerted himself at every casual opening to provide for the maintenance of those dependent on him. It was a hard

struggle ; and, by degrees, they broke off all connection with the few friends who had not abandoned them in their adversity, except with aunt Maria. "There was a community of misfortune between us which made us forget all shame and fear of each other," said she ; "and when dissevered from the rest of the world and lost in the crowds of London, I had always the clue to their retreat."

What this community of misfortune was she did not explain, but went on to tell us that only within the last year had Edith been separated from her mother and brother. Wherever they had gone, however they had to slave, they had kept the poor soul with them ; and to the constant depression of her presence, aunt Maria attributed the morbid state into which Paul himself had fallen. She had prevailed upon them with the utmost difficulty to commit Edith to her care, if not for a permanency, at least for an interval, that he might have time and opportunity to rally against his growing melancholy before it was too late. Mrs. Westmore's terror for her son inclined her to listen to reason ; she

allowed her poor daughter to be transferred to Aberford, and a few weeks after, she and Paul abandoned their desolate London lodgings for that secluded cottage in the hollow of the down where Connie and I had accidentally seen them. Already, aunt Maria said, the beneficial effects of his release from the continual burden of his sister's afflicted state were becoming apparent; he had spoken to her of certain work that he was doing, and of expectations which he now ventured to entertain in a more hopeful tone than she had heard from him since the great calamity and disgrace of his father's fate had fallen upon him; and she trusted that if his mother could be induced not to recal Edith, the change and revival of his former courage and spirit might become permanent, and lead him to the accomplishment of some of the ambitions of his youth. "And once," she added, "he had as generous ambitions and as fair prospects as ever brightened the opening of any man's life."

I inquired if the elder Mr. Westmore still lived, but she said, no; he had only survived

his expatriation four years, but that Mr. Jonathan Halbutt was flourishing in the colony, having long since obtained his pardon.

"It seems so cruel that the crime of one member of a family should be visited on all the rest," said Connie. "What a piteous story it is, aunt Maria! And you do not believe that Mr. Westmore was guilty after all?"

"No, my dear, I do not believe that he was guilty. I believe he was the victim of one of those manifold injustices which *time* has it not in charge to undo. But it is undone now—it is undone now! If ever man suffered innocent, he did."

Aunt Maria offered no evidence, no why or because in support of her opinion, but the depth and earnestness of her own faith carried its full weight and impression to our minds.

"I wish punishment always began and ended with the guilty person," said Connie; "it is very hard to scout the whole flock because there is one black sheep in it. I think Edith's lover ought to have loved her better because she was in trouble, and I do not see any justice in Paul's



losing his situation because his father was accused of dishonesty."

"Ah, my pet, a good name is a very precious thing," replied aunt Maria, sighing; "none of us are willing to bring the suspicion of a taint upon it; and as we can neither limit nor foresee the consequences of any act, good, bad, or indifferent, that we may commit, it is best to steer our course by old-established laws and morals, though feeling must stand by and suffer when we do. I take it that there are very few men who would have a cordial welcome for a daughter-in-law whose father was notorious in his own section of the world as a convicted felon; for though his own family and I vehemently protest that Mr. Westmore was innocent, that is not the view of his other friends. It is easier to fancy ourselves deceived in a man's whole life and character than it is to assert that a judge and jury have proved an innocent person guilty; and people, in general, will do it. As for punishment ending with the one individual, Connie, all laws, divine and human, are against it. We can never isolate ourselves so far as to suffer alone; if we could,

the sharpest fang of retribution would be drawn."

Poor old aunt Maria looked as if she spoke out of the depths of a sorrowful experience of her own. After that she talked no more, and in a little while we said good-night and betook ourselves stealthily to bed, lest Sofona should wake and hear us, and insist on sitting up, too, the next night.

## XX.

## TIDINGS FROM HOME.

WE had been nearly a fortnight at aunt Maria's before we heard from home, but at the end of that time there came a long chatty letter from Ursula, giving us a full and particular account of all her proceedings since we went away. She seemed to have been enjoying herself in the highest degree; almost too much, perhaps, for papa and mamma to have profited as they ought to have done by her being left behind for their companion.

She had driven out and dined twice with Miss Pegge Burnell; she had lunched at Dr. Eden's with papa by Dr. Eden's own special invitation, and had been so much fascinated by some fine paintings that he possessed as to have

determined "never to draw another line in crayons, but to take up oils at once." She had also attended a Dorcas meeting at the Brown Standons', whom she described as "airified, fantastical folk, setting up for a family of genius;" and had walked out daily with either Mrs. Braithwaite or Miss Cranmer, who, she said, were capital company. But the pith of her letter crept out, as is not unusual with feminine correspondence, in the postscript:

"Papa has been rather complaining since you went away," she wrote; "so I persuaded mamma that it would be well to call in Dr. Julius Eden. He has been several times, but he takes care to announce that they are *friendly*, not *professional* visits, and he always contrives to come quite late in the afternoon, when he has leisure to stay for half an hour. You cannot think how pleasant he is when he puts off his stiffness and reserve; we have delightful book chats together, and he has just lent me to read a work after Doris's own heart, *Une Voyage autour de ma Chambre*, by Xavier de Maistre. He is certainly the person here best worth knowing; at Rose-

berry I used to affirm that the barristers were the most agreeable class of men, but I think now I should give it in favour of the doctors."

A scrap note from mamma enclosed in the lengthier document, set our minds at rest about papa, who was much as usual, she said; Ursula had fidgeted him and herself until they fancied that something was amiss, but Dr. Julius Eden had not thought it requisite to prescribe.

"I wish," said Connie impatiently, "Ursie would leave off her tricks of exaggerating; it will almost worry mamma to death if she constantly suggests to her to be anxious about papa. It is very kind and sensible of Dr. Julius Eden to say there is nothing the matter. I do not believe anything is the matter, unless Ursie lets him go without his reading aloud of an evening, and then he is sure to grow tired and miserable before bedtime: he always does, and mamma cannot read to him by candle light. I wish I were back at home again, but Ursie promised faithfully she would not let any of her own work interfere with that. She has perhaps dropped it altogether; I should not be surprised to find

the mark in *Eöthen* just where I left it. Poor papa! but it is too bad of her if she has."

I suggested to Connie that it was of no use to tease herself with fancying what Ursie's shortcomings might be, but her conjectures were discovered to be not very wide of the fact when she had the opportunity of testing them.

After this letter we heard from Ursula more frequently, and in one of her epistles she frankly said that if aunt Maria wished to detain us beyond the six weeks of our proposed visit we could be very well dispensed with at home; aunt Maria, who expected to read all letters from Redcross, caught at the idea in a moment.

"It is very kind and thoughtful, indeed, of Ursie," said she, "and if you can be spared, children, I shall be truly thankful to keep you."

There were two or three ways of looking at Ursula's suggestion, and our view was not in exact accordance with aunt Maria's, but she looked so eagerly anxious for our acquiescence that, on the spur of the moment, I promised that one, if not both of us, would overstay the intended term of our visit, and also if nothing



occurred to prevent it, that I would come to her again for a few weeks in the fall of the year. She thanked me warmly in her gratitude and surprise, and said it would be a kindness beyond what she would have ventured to require from any of us, it would help her through the summer and be quite something to look forward to.

Poor old aunt Maria, this was a most unusual tone for her to take; it was not long, I began to think, that kindness to her would be left in the power of any of us; she was very much softened and broken, indeed, as I saw more and more every hour of our stay at Aberford; but as for giving up what she had undertaken, or even making over the arduous part of her duties to a nurse and being contented with superintending their right performance, to that she would not listen for a moment. She would go on until she dropt over her work. "There would be time enough to rest by and by," was her answer to every attempt at remonstrance.

After the first few days we found the monotonous routine of our life at Aberford much the

same as in the visits of previous years. Sofona, with all her intellectuality, was crazed and tedious company, and to watch poor Edith's helpless, childish form was enough to make the most cheerful person melancholy at times. There was greater variety of books, but unfortunately very few of them were new to us; the village was one without church or great house, belonging to the parish of Sanford, and had absolutely nothing to attract or occupy us. We therefore ate, slept, worked and walked day after day in the same formal groove, until the original six weeks wore to an end. I then wished Connie to go home, but there was a difficulty about her travelling alone, so the matter ended in our staying on together until nearly the end of June; and even then I did not leave aunt Maria without a very irksome sense of self-reproach at doing so. It seemed unkind to forsake her when there were three of us, but she did not view it in that light, perhaps she appreciated now more than formerly, the laborious tedium of a life against the grain, and felt that, for the present, we had had enough of it. She said she should expect me

in the late autumn, and with that we took our leave, our spirits rising as we came within scent of the sea breeze again, as the spirits of children rise when they are released from the durance of school and are on their way home for the holidays.

## XXI.

## IN THE GAY SEASON.

THEY were all glad to see us at home again, and Ursula had a hundred and one little incidents to tell us that had happened while we were away ; it seemed that she had been leading almost an adventurous life. We found her especially busy over an elaborate piece of tapestry work which she had undertaken at Mrs. Maurice's instance, for a bazaar that had been recently announced to take place in August in aid of a fund for the restoration of Scarcliffe old church. All the other ladies of the neighbourhood were busy in the same way, and very soon Connie and I, like the rest, found our leisure laid under heavy contribution.

The gay season in Scarcliffe usually began in Máy, and was supposed to attain its meridian during

the months of July, August, and September. Red-cross, during the early years of our residence there, could not be said to have blossomed yet into the dignity of having any *season*, but it was already betraying tokens of latent germination. We had no weekly paper to publish our list of company, but at our old original bazaar those who were ambitious of notoriety might inscribe their distinguished names to be read and inquired over by the settled inhabitants of the place, whose mild and innocent excitement it was daily to inspect the record of bad autographs in black lead pencil which lay exalted on the tall desk near the doorway. I believe it was rather interesting to us to learn that Mr. Arthur Smith, wife and family, had exchanged Clapham Rise for West Cliffe; that Mr. Claude Sepia was staying at Beacon Hill Cottage; that the Misses Wearybout were reviving their roses at Elm Grove, and that Mrs. Major Calverly was to be found at Rock Savage. In the absence of other excitement it is notorious how much conversation can be got out of such immense facts as these in a little provincial community;

and in this respect Redcross was no whit behind its contemporaries.

We became speculative on the number, ages and dispositions of the Arthur Smith progeny; we were anxious to learn on what kind of picture Mr. Claude Sepia was at work, and read *The Times* critique upon his last, as exhibited at the Royal Academy, with as deep an interest as if we possessed the honour of his personal acquaintance, which we did not, only knowing him by sight at church as a rather good-looking young man with roving eyes and an amazed head of iron-grey hair. The three Misses Wearybout excited our commiserating wonder; three middle-aged young ladies who would not grow old they were. Through what emotions, flirtations, hopes, fears, joys, disappointments, must they have been shuffled by the cool hand of time ere they could have got their jaded, battered, eager look; three old young faces, narrow, dry, restless, carved into stereotyped smiles of defunct fascination, crowned by faded yellow hair and cheap fashionable bonnets. Oh! for a fountain of Jouvence to restore to them their early bloom, or for a draught of Lethe to



make them forget past triumphs and give them courage to look at the near future when they must be old whether they will or no. And Mrs. Major Calverly in her magnificence, fair and comely, rich and widowed, who was said to beat her maid and pinch her button-boy, and never to pay a bill without a piece of work, she also was a fruitful source of talk. Was her husband in the Queen's or the Company's service? Was he K.C.B., or would he have been tried by court-martial, but for his opportune decease? Did he and Mrs. Major Calverly lead a harmonious life, or, what seemed more probable from popular rumour, the life of unequally yoked dog and cat?

Early in the season thus did we speculate and wonder, but when July began the stream of visitors flowed over us fast and our fancies could no longer stem it. On a sunny day it was very cheerful and pleasant to walk on the road between Scarcliffe and Redcross, to watch the company arrive, and many such a lazy loiter between the Borough Hill and the Burnell Arms had I with papa during that first summer of our sojourn by the

sea. From the tops of coaches, from the bowels of omnibuses, from vans, from smart barouches, from gallant steeds, from mules, from donkeys, our visitors descended, bent on holiday enjoyment and the possession of the best lodgings.

There came paterfamilias in a suit of neat shepherds' plaid and a chequered straw hat with blue ribbon, looking so fresh, happy and cockneyfied; and materfamilias rather red, anxious and dusty, with a large young brood hanging at her skirts, grouped miscellaneously with a nurse and baby, perambulator, last year's spades, hoops, wheelbarrows, and wagons, which entangled everybody's legs but paterfamilias'; he, shouldering a stick, would expatiate up the road with his nose in the air, snuffing the sea breeze delightedly, and shoving all the visible cares of life upon the broad and comely shoulders of his helpmate. As this charming family passed through the village the door of each empty lodging-house would open to swallow it up; but materfamilias was a provident woman, and a full week before she crossed the threshold of her comfortable villa at Highgate she had settled that she would go to Mrs.

Bluff's on the beach, and Mrs. Bluff's, on the beach, engulfs the whole troop accordingly.

And newly married couples, blessed in each other and in a conviction that not a soul can guess their interesting circumstances, would arrive with the shiniest of luggage, absurdly fancying that they look like staid old folks. Their favourite retreat was into a grove of greenery where was then a lovely old cottage all roses, thatch, jessamine and earwigs, popularly known in Redcross as Honeymoon Cottage. When we went down on the shore we used to see their happy young faces again, and to wish them every success with their geological hammers and collections of seaweed and anemones; and to wonder whether, in the course of years, they would attain to the comfortable dignity of pater- and mater-familias before described, or whether they would have so many calls from those inevitable tax-gatherers, ill luck and hard measure, that they would give in before time utterly broken and beaten in the sharp struggle how to live.

The sketching young lady never failed us; she might be seen on the beach any morning

with a box of moist colours beside her and a formidable block on her lap. She always appeared as if she were going to do amazing execution, and began by patronizing the prospect with an admiring gaze and a volley of superlatives. Then, upon the spotless paper, she would rapidly develop a corner of hard blue sky, balanced by a corner of dark brown cliff, connected together by an expanse of deep green sea, with a boat in the foreground and a very distinct white sail patched with vermilion in the distance. She would show a crew of two men and a boy on board the ship, and paint the name "Seagull" on the boat; and this triumph of art would be exhibited to her stay-at-home friends and fervently admired, though I regret to say that it was invariably a cruel libel on both scenery and atmosphere.

Occasionally too, Redcross was honoured by a little party of professionals who looked more stagey than when on the stage itself; and we had smoke-dried gentlemen, who walked as if they were bent on getting a month's air and exercise compressed into a single week; and

invalids who came for their last glimpse of the sea, and would presently go out with the tide into the deep, dark waters; and poor pairs with little cripples in gocarts; and obstreperous gentlemen with dogs which ran into the surf and then rushing in amongst nurses and infantry, acted as perambulating shower baths, and caused universal scurry and screaming; and young ladies in every variety of prettifying and uglifying seaside gear; and hopeful children—men and women in little—building up their towers and fortifications of sand to be washed down by the first wave, as many of their future labours would, ten to one, be washed down by floods of adverse circumstance.

Very mournful faces met us too, sometimes faces of widows, and fatherless children, and sonless mothers—widows, and fatherless children and sonless mothers of men whose names all the world knows on the sad eastern battle rolls of death——

As it appeared to me there was a charming freedom from the conventionalities of civilized life developed amongst the mass of seaside holiday folks. They had escaped from the watchful eyes and gossip of intimate society, and could expatiate

in the locality that did not know them with emancipated spirits truly delightful to witness; there was a frank honesty about their stare, a pleasant lack of responsibility in their ways and demeanour suggestive of the remote periods, before manners were invented, when all the world was natural.

I remember two old ladies startling us by appearing at the open window when we were sitting at breakfast the second morning after our return from Aberford, and asking if they might pass down our garden to reach the old Grove Fields. We gave them leave, but they did not go away; they stood making complimentary remarks on the scenery in general, and on our cottage and flowers in particular, interspersed with valuable topographical information about their native county, Shropshire. They must have been charming conversational women in their own sphere, but we found them inconveniently obtrusive in ours, for after that fatal permission to go through our garden to the Old Grove Fields, they reappeared continually, making their way to the holly hedge, until Ursula, one day, in spite of mamma's gentle remonstrance,



sallied forth without bonnet or shawl, turned them back, led them into the lane and beyond our garden limits to the stile at the beginning of the public footpath, and so, as she said, "Put an end to them."

Redcross in its primitive estate, beautiful and pleasant as it was, had still its grievances, which gave our visitors a grumbling safety-valve. Our post came in but once a day, very early in the morning, and was delivered by a boy, who dropt newspapers and letters in the porch and departed rapidly if there was a moment's delay in answering his summons. We had no shops exactly, but at the post-office we could—if we liked—purchase our family supply of groceries, bacon, eggs, biscuits, tobacco and snuff; also locks, candles, extinguishers, fryingpans, curtain rings, buttons, tape, cheap jewellery, Dutch dolls and other miscellaneous commodities! The post-mistress was a most affable woman, but rather wanting in official virtues—which lack led ultimately to her displacement in favour of a more punctual, accurate and steady-going widow, who still presides at the office, but only combines the

sale of a little stationery with her public duties. As for the old original bazaar, I may briefly say that everything the youthful holiday mind could desiderate in the way of toys, boats, carts, drums, trumpets, spades, wheelbarrows, balls and baskets, was there to be found at two hundred per cent. above value. Everything that industrious female fingers delight to ply on rainy days in the way of ornamental needles, pins, hooks, wools, silks and cottons, was also there accumulated; and a few dusky old romances reposed on the upper shelf, but I am not aware that anybody ever read them. Many useful articles might be procured in this ark of oddments, if purchasers were not in a hurry, and did not mind waiting until they were dug out of the chaos that encumbered every corner of the dark little room; but if pressed for time it was much the easiest and speediest way of supplying their needs to walk down to Scarccliffe and Mr. Simeon Moore's fancy repository.

But very few persons ever were in a hurry at Redcross when first I knew it, and most people considered it a duty to some extent to support

native enterprise. Redcross proper was then very genteel and very exclusive, and not having a band or other means of public amusement it was also very humdrum—for which reason a select few preferred it.

When the lodgings were all taken, however, Mrs. Willoughby and Miss Cranmer, who professed an aversion to the place when desecrated by an influx of strangers, commonly placed their own houses at the disposal of an agent, for a handsome consideration, and betook themselves to fresh fields and pastures new with their families; but during the summer following our coming to Redcross, the Scarcliffe church bazaar having been extensively advertised with all its contingent attractions, they determined to stay at home until it was over, and, meanwhile, to improve the beautiful weather by as many outdoor parties and picnics as the neighbourhood would bear when reinforced by a few strangers. These entertainments were just about beginning when Connie and I returned from aunt Maria's.

## XXII.

## A STRAWBERRY PARTY.

THE first time we saw Miss Pegge Burnell after our return from Aberford, she said to Connie,—

“The strawberries have been waiting for you ever so long, pretty one! I told Ursula there should be no garden party at the Priory until you came home, but now hold yourselves in readiness for me the first old English summer day we have; I only send round to my friends the morning I want them, when I see what the sun has made up its mind to do.”

And accordingly, one brilliant morning during the same week there came a single line, “Strawberry luncheon, two o’clock, Priory,” in the old lady’s singular hand, an intimation which we were expected to answer in person or not at all.

I had a strong inclination to stay at home and

be quiet that day, and I should certainly have yielded to my wish, but for Ursula's sharp remonstrances.

"You are the *flattest* person in the world, Doris!" said she, in an accusatory tone; "and I do believe you are giving way to it, until you will grow perfectly indifferent to everything but your own indolent devices. What is the good of moping? that won't bring back the dead to life. I call it almost wicked of you, flying in the face of Providence, as nurse says. Now, do rouse yourself and go!"

So I roused myself and went, it was easier to seem cheerful amongst strangers than it was to stay at home and be worried.

I think Ursula had a little justice on her side, though it was roughly expressed. My old Thought-Book convicts me by my own confessions of having had a few very, very dreary months at this time. The anniversary of Philip Massey's death had come round, and, somehow, my resignation broke down for awhile, and I went through all the pains of that bereavement again. There was always a touch of the wild beast in

me, when I suffered I liked to hide and suffer in secret. I used to make a pretence of reading quietly to get away to my own room alone, and there I would sit for hours by the open window, looking over to the down, and passively bearing a heavy weight of dull anguish which nothing could lift off. I have a very grateful remembrance of dear Connie at this period ; if she came in upon my solitude she never tried to stir me up, or to reason me out of my unreasonable mood, but she would just put her arm round my shoulder, and make some remark about the soft landscape which the window framed like a picture, and after standing quiet a few minutes she would go away without seeming to have seen anything. I cannot pretend to know how it is with other women, but with me the urgency of well-meant consolation in any trouble of mind is just one of the hardest parts of it to bear. Ursie intended kindly when she told me it was no use moping, we could not bring back the dead to life, as if I did not know that ; as if the very nerve of my sorrow were not that string in the heart which echoes to the never, never more of the irreversible decree of death.



She complained of my *flatness*; the word, as she used it, was fully expressive of what she meant. My powers of enjoyment had fallen to a very low level, indeed; it was now irksome to me to go into any society; if I went out it was as a duty that was to be done, and done with as quickly and quietly as possible. I was often disappointed in myself, because I cared so little for any of the things beyond the four walls of home, which once interested me so warmly; every exertion was a burden, every change a trouble to me. My nearest approach to being happy was when I had a new book after my own heart, a comfortable lounging-chair in the sunshine or beside the fire, and the rest of them in the room too busy amongst themselves to be observant of me. If we do not care for certain things any more, trying to care will not make us care, and probably everybody's idea of what it is to be happy, and what it is to enjoy, is different from his neighbours, and different from his own, too, at each stage of life. My early visions of happiness combined very much larger elements than peace and quietness, books and warmth, as I

suppose all young people's should ; but my individual life of later years has rested in tolerable content on those moderate means of satisfaction. Perhaps, in the end, it comes to no more than this, that when we have undergone our share of excitement, of active doing and suffering, the elasticity of feeling is so far relaxed, that thenceforward it reposes on dulness, as tired limbs, after a long race, will repose on the hard ground and find it luxury.

Spasmodic struggles after pleasure which we have lost the power of enjoying, are the painfulest efforts of humanity. I would not, and I could not make them, though mossy dulness had overgrown me, heart and brain. I took refuge, as so many do, in books, and blessed, say I, are the writers thereof. What unredeemable debts of gratitude the world has incurred to some of them ! Books accommodate themselves to every variety of temper ; silent friends to calm and comfort, never to misconstrue, or vex or challenge you. If they moralize, they do it without any special personal point ; if they preach, it is in moderation ; if they bore, the remedy is in our own hands to

lay them down; if they stir the slumbrous brain with great thoughts, it is so much pure gain; if they warm the chilled heart with generous feelings, still it is gain; if they fire the dreamy soul with noble emulation, it is ever and ever golden gain; so I say once more in my dulness and my gratitude, blessed be the writers of books!

But this is not Miss Pegge Burnell's strawberry party.

"Connie will be far too conspicuous," Ursula whispered to me, with an air of discontent, as we were crossing the old Grove Fields on our way to the Priory, the little one being in advance and out of hearing; "far too conspicuous."

"How?" I inquired, for she was only dressed in a clear white muslin, with a scarf like it, and the simplest of straw hats.

Ursula could not explain, but she said she knew what she meant, and without further allusion to the abstruse point, we reached the Priory Lodge and walked up the beautiful avenue to the terrace, which was already as gay as a flower-show, with Miss Pegge Burnell's assembled guests. We met and exchanged greetings with several of our

acquaintance before we discovered our hostess, but, at length, we found her sitting just within the conservatory door, surrounded by a select knot of friends. She welcomed us gaily, especially Connie, to whom she said,—

“Come here, pretty one, you are to be my queen rose to-day,” and she detained her there beside her, when Ursula and I moved away to speak to others whom we knew.

“Miss Pegge Burnell ought to have more sense than to flatter Connie to her face,” Ursula remarked disapprovingly. “It would make an angel conceited to be called always ‘pretty one,’ and Connie has far too strong a tendency that way to escape unharmed, her head is more than half turned already. Queen-rose, indeed! I am sure there are many finer figures of women here at this moment, than she is or ever will be.”

I would not enter into so unprofitable a dispute, and therefore held my peace until we encountered Mr. Maurice and his kind wife, who engaged me in conversation, while Ursula joined herself to Miss Cranmer, with whom was that disagreeable Mr. Tom Claridge of whom previous mention has

been made. They were soon launched into a very lively and rather loud discussion, which presently attracted the notice of Mrs. Maurice; she observed them in silence for a moment or two, and then said with an expression of as much disgust as her gentle face was capable of assuming:

"I think if your sister Ursula knew the character of the man to whom she is talking, she would exercise a little more reserve. Warn her, my dear, it is to no girl's advantage to encourage the intimacy of Mr. Tom Claridge. Miss Cranmer is a woman of the world and old enough to choose her own company, but Ursula is too inexperienced to be left entirely to her lack of discrimination."

"Mr. Tom Claridge is a loose fellow without either conduct or principle," added the rector, in an austere tone. "Such a man has no business to appear amongst innocent women and children. I am surprised our old friend should have invited him."

"Perhaps she did not invite him, he is staying at Sir William's, and may have taken advantage of their card," suggested Mrs. Maurice. "Miss Pegge Burnell promised he should never darken

her doors again. Mrs. Tom Claridge is at her father's too, but I don't see her here, or either of the children."

Just then came up the curate, Mr. Stewart, to ask where was Miss Martha, and I turned aside to speak to the Layels who were passing by. Miss Kitty, the fair-haired one, had a little girl by the hand, a pupil of her own, as she told me, and the eldest of four that she taught, children of a lady who had taken a house at Redcross for the summer. I was glad to hear that she had obtained some teaching, and as I had understood that both the sisters were governesses, I asked the other if she had been equally successful, to which she replied that, at present, she did not intend to take any pupils; and then, as they, like myself, seemed to have more taste for the pretty glades of the park, than for the gay company on the terrace, we went down the broad flights of steps, and strolled away towards the cliff. We had not gone far, however, when we were overtaken by a noisy little boy, who brought us a message to the effect that we were not to go out of sight until after luncheon, when we remembered the straw-



berries—ostensible object of the gathering—and leisurely retraced our steps.

It appeared that these entertainments were very popular amongst Miss Pegge Burnell's friends, and that even strangers, whose names were inscribed at the library, were permitted on presentation of a card, this opportunity of ranging over the Priory grounds, which at all other times were strictly private. Her acquaintance was both extensive and miscellaneous, and in her desire to extend hospitality to all, Miss Pegge Burnell had originated these strawberry luncheons, which took place at the Priory once a fortnight as long as there was any fruit left to give them a name. These were quite gala days for the children of her friends, who were served with an early dinner to themselves, while their elders enjoyed the provision made elsewhere for them. Pleasanter gatherings could not be. There was the Scarcliffe town band playing their best pieces on the lawn to give them an air of fête; those who, like Mrs. Peacocke, dreaded being brought in close contact with ineligible people, had ample space and opportunity for bowing a cool recognition

and escaping; and those who were glad to meet with simple friends whom they might never meet elsewhere were gratified too. I remember that day seeing the old Earl and Countess Calcedon, who had brought a noisy troop of grandchildren over to enjoy themselves, holding a long talk with poor Miss Alworthy, a superannuated governess, once in the family, but now residing at Lady Betty's Home,—an asylum for reduced gentlewomen founded in Redcross towards the close of the last century by the Lady Betty Pegge Burnell; and Miss Alworthy would be all the happier for that kindly condescension for many a day to come.

When we regained the terrace we found that most of the visitors had entered the house in quest of refreshments; Miss Pegge Burnell was just issuing from the conservatory, assisted by a white-bearded gentleman whom I did not know; Connie and Dr. Julius Eden were close behind, and with them a gay bevy of young people laughing and talking merrily. Dr. Julius came down to speak to me, and then we all passed through the hall, pausing there a moment while Miss Pegge Burnell and her solemn-visaged butler

exchanged a few energetic words, and so forward into the drawing-room, where the first persons I noticed were Mr. Tom Claridge, Miss Cranmer, and my sister Ursula, still engaged in familiar conversation.

Mr. Tom Claridge instantly detached himself and came forward to meet Miss Pegge Burnell with an air of perfect assurance and self-satisfaction; but the old lady protruded her nether lip, overlooked his outstretched hand, and said, with the utmost distinctness and deliberation, "Mr. Tom Claridge, my servant Quennell is waiting at the door with a message for you."

He looked puzzled for a moment, but Miss Pegge Burnell's expression of countenance probably enlightened him as to her meaning, for a dull red suffused his face and he left the room hurriedly. As he did not reappear either then or in the gardens afterwards, I conjecture that Quennell's message was a standing order from his mistress to exclude Mr. Tom Claridge from the Priory whenever he should be hardy enough to present himself there. Certain persons who overheard his dismissal cast furtive, significant

glances at each other, but some looked very much astonished, as my sister Ursula, for instance, who knew no adequate reason for it. His absence, however, was not a source of regret to any of those who were better informed, unless it were Miss Cranmer, who afterwards remarked to some of her acquaintance that such behaviour as Miss Pegge Burnell's might do for the country, but she should like to know what would be thought of a lady in London who should open her doors to all her friends without distinction of class, and then turn a gentleman out because his private life was not quite puritanical. When I communicated Mrs. Maurice's observations to Ursula, she was equally vexed and dismayed to learn that she should have been remarked on as displaying a frank cordiality towards a person whose reputation was so notoriously evil that a liberal-minded woman like Miss Pegge Burnell had publicly avowed and executed her determination to close her doors in his face; and she promised herself forthwith never to be seen speaking with him again.

After this little incident all the company gradually dispersed themselves through the library and

dining-rooms, where the tables were spread for luncheon ; up-heaped crystal dishes of the vermeil fruit which gave it its refreshing name, each flanked with a jug of cream, figuring most conspicuously down the centre of each. Everybody was in high good-humour, and inclined to be happy without formality or tedious ceremony ; and after the luncheon was over they trooped forth again into the sunshine and set the children to dance on the grass to the music of the band. Some of the grown up children presently joined in, Connie with Dr. Julius amongst the rest, and while she was afterwards telling me how much she had enjoyed it, up came Miss Theodora Bousfield, and tapping her on her pretty chin with a bit of myrtle she had in her hand, said pleasantly, "Child, I shall be jealous of you, you have stolen my friend away from me ; give an account of what you have done with him ?" Connie answered with a rosy, half-conscious blush, "Who did she mean ?" on which Miss Theodora echoed "who?" with significant emphasis, and then turned off to rejoin some other friends whom she had quitted to speak to us.

I forbore to look at Connie just then, but I could not help hoping her serious days were yet a year or two distant; and while I was thinking and speculating within myself over the train of possibilities Miss Theodora Bousfield's light words had suggested, Dr. Julius came up and claimed Connie again, telling her she must remember she had been put under his charge by Miss Pegge Burnell to be amused throughout the afternoon.

"But you went away and left me standing by myself in the middle of the last figure," replied she.

"Somebody came and whispered that somebody else was hurt, but happily it turned out to be a false alarm; so now, if you do not know all the ins and outs of the Priory grounds, let me be your guide; I think I am familiar with every tree and stone about the place."

"I will go if Doris will come too," Connie said cheerfully; so we set out together, a party of three, and, after traversing the park, went up through a beautiful grassy glade in the woods behind the Priory towards a grotto which Miss Pegge Burnell had had constructed on what she esteemed the finest point of view about the place.



The footpath was not wide enough for more than two persons, and I instinctively dropt behind, leaving Dr. Julius and Connie to go on together. I had companionship enough, however, in the disquieting thoughts for which Miss Theodora Bousfield was mainly answerable, and I wished in my heart, most sincerely, that she had exercised her tongue with a little more discretion.

Then I looked out of my mind at the pair before me, and vaguely wondered and hoped more than it would be possible to confess. Child—I might call Connie *child* if I would, and so, in one sense she was, and would be all her days if *child* be synonymous with innocent candour and unsuspicious affectionateness of disposition, but in another she was certainly beginning to have feelings, fancies, and dreams quite other than those of children—fancies, feelings, and dreams, in fact, such as tend to the unconscious blooming of girlhood and womanhood.

Dr. Julius Eden, for anything I could tell, might have feelings, fancies, and dreams too, but he did not look like it. He was not a person to be known in one, two, or half a dozen

meetings. He bore a very good personal and professional reputation in Scarcliffe and Redcross, both on his own account and because he was his uncle's nephew; he was an acceptable person in society, though he was rather reserved and not remarkably gracious. Men all liked him evidently, and women generally professed and exemplified a respect for him, which probably arose out of his respectful manner towards them. Neither by speech nor act had I ever known him imply an ill-natured, contemptuous, or ungenerous sentiment about them, though his profession and his age, for he was just thirty, must have given him as many opportunities of knowing the sex as men can commonly boast. Giddy girls stood in wholesome awe of him; discerning, perhaps, that their kittenish airs and graces were wasted on a grave physician, who regarded their pranks indulgently as if he saw quite through them, and was wise enough to make every allowance for the superabundant vivacity of some young temperaments escaping in this volatile essence of laughter, frolic, and flirting. The liveliest damsel would hardly have been tempted to take a liberty with him,

but, I believe, at the same time, the weakest and most erring would have found in him a merciful judge.

Authentic gossip had some time before apprised me of the real terms on which Dr. Julius stood towards Miss Theodora Bousfield. There was no engagement between them, and there never had been, but that was not for any want of his wishing it. Miss Theodora had been his first love; as a boy of twenty he had conceived an enthusiasm of passion for her, which, under her judicious treatment, had toned down, at last, into a genial, friendly alliance. She was nearly ten years older than himself, and had gone through her own tragedy while he was bowling a hoop in his round jacket; so she said to him: "Don't let us quarrel, Julius, you will be grateful to me by and by for saying *no*;" and, at this epoch, he had probably attained to the state of mind she had generously predicted for him.

She was a handsome, distinguished-looking woman still; dark-browed, soft-eyed, and voluptuous; her form was tall, massive, and stately, and she had a perfect air of well-bred ease.

Twenty years before, if she had gone upon the stage, she might have made her fortune; but, being condemned to the sober decorums of private life, she had missed it. She had been extremely admired in her youth, and had had many lovers of a degree above her own; even now she was more courted and spoilt than most girls in their freshness. She was the most naturally charming, fascinating woman I ever knew; nobody but Monsieur De St. Beuve could have done her biography justice; I do not know the true details of her life, though they were a perennially reviving source of Redcross gossip; but there was a record in cipher on her face, a history and a secret which, if interpreted, would be assuredly a thrilling tale of passion and struggle, such as few pass through and live.

I had allowed my meditations to carry me quite up into the clouds, for Connie had to give me a gentle little shake, to bring me back to the contemplation of the beautiful prospect when we reached the grotto.

“Don’t you hear, Doris? those are the Erlstone woods; you were wishing a few days ago

that we could walk there," said she, pointing to a dark tract of undulating forest country, which lay inland over beyond Avonmore.

"Erlstone is eight miles off; too far for ladies' walking," interposed Dr. Julius.

"I could do it in a long day, but, perhaps, it would be too much for Doris," Connie rejoined.

"It would be too much for either of you, and I beg you will not attempt it," urged the doctor imperatively.

"I can walk ten miles without feeling at all overtired," persisted Connie.

Dr. Julius, perhaps, perceived that the little one made rather a strong point of her pedestrian powers, for he asked with a quizzical air: "Are you getting into training to trot over Europe in the track of those unprotected ladies who have been chronicling their adventures of late?"

"No, indeed!" quoth Connie, curling her dainty lip.

"With a stout little pair of Balmorals and a blue ugly you might achieve as much as the most enterprising."

"When you are out on your next physician's

holiday, perhaps you may meet me in that trim," said she, falling into his vein.

"I shall regard you with a most respectful awe. I know no type of woman so terrible as the strong-minded, able-bodied pedestrian who lays hold of all the rights of our sex, and shelters them under the privileges of her own. In Norway I had to share my supper, and resign my comfortable bespoken bed to one, and to listen, moreover, to her feats in the way of climbing and riding, which quite surpassed my own. I had a bad cold at the time, and she was in a state of boisterous health; much better able to sleep on impromptu sacks and straw than myself, but she had not the grace to say so and do it."

"That was very inconsiderate and selfish of her. I will remember not to behave so ill to any invalid with whom I may fall in on my travels. But I think seriously a pedestrian tour must be very delightful, don't you, Dr. Julius?"

"Yes, in fine weather and pleasant company—much depends on your company. My first excursion abroad I made with my cousin, Jack Trevor, a young fellow, who behaved capitally so long as



we were in civilized regions; but when we got out of the circle of bitter beer, he became intolerable. This unforeseen difficulty cut our tour a fortnight shorter than we intended, and I have taken care since not to engage with any friend so susceptible of thirst as to be capable of turning his back on the finest scenery of the Pyrenees for the sake of his beloved drink."

"Checks and disappointments would hardly come to me in that shape," said Connie; "nervous terrors and fears of cold would be more probable."

"Very real evils both, Miss Connie, though your imagination may not play you tricks, and you may not be shy of reclining in pretty, damp, shady nooks."

"No need to recline in pretty, damp, shady nooks, Dr. Julius," replied she, with a touch of laughing sarcasm; "can we not bend down the bough of a tree and perch on that, or go right into the middle of a furze-bush if we are overtaken by fatigue on a moor?"

"It is vain to deny any longer that you are training for an unprotected tour!"

"Indeed, I think the person who knows no

alternative between reclining in pretty, damp, shady nooks, or going on till he drops, would be in the unprotected position. Doris, do you consider that Dr. Julius Eden shows as much resource and adaptability to circumstances as I do with regard to pedestrian touring?"

"Miss Connie, I see you are up to anything from a game at cricket to climbing Mont Blanc!" retorted he.

"No, no," said Connie, in a deprecating tone; "I have never played cricket since I was fourteen; mamma made me give it up then, because the boys were too rough for me; but I plead guilty to having liked it though it might be hoydenish."

"Not at all; I have no prejudice against girls engaging in active games out of doors; evidently the practice has conduced to nothing but good health in your case; girls may exercise their muscles without unsexing themselves. I thought I heard some one call."

We listened, and presently heard my sister Ursula's voice at a little distance, summoning Connie and me by name.

"They are here in the grotto," Dr. Julius answered.

We all left our shelter and went out into the glade, and, looking upwards, saw Ursula with Mrs. Peacocke and Mr. Barston making their way down to us by a steep zigzag from the top of the wood. When they joined us, Ursula asked where we had been, saying she had sought us everywhere; for it was nearly six o'clock, and everybody else was gone. Dr. Julius looked at his watch, remarked that it was later than he thought, but the time had flown; and then he bade us all a hasty good-bye on the plea of having to call upon Captain Willoughby before he went home to dinner."

"I need not ask if you have had a pleasant afternoon; you looked in the seventh heaven of enjoyment when we caught you," Ursula observed with austere significance, as we were returning home after taking leave of Mrs. Peacocke and Mr. Barston.

"It has been a very nice party; I wish we may have some more of the same kind," said Connie calmly.

“Umph!” cried Ursula in a sudden burst of temper, which took us both by surprise. “I shall ask mamma whether *you* are to be allowed to make yourself such an object of general observation wherever you go as you did to-day!”

Connie with infinite discretion immediately quickened her steps and conveyed herself out of hearing, leaving me to bear the brunt of the attack alone. I tried to stave it off by saying persuasively,—

“Now, Ursie, don’t be foolish. You know in your heart that you are unjust to Connie. I am sure the most injurious remark that anybody could make on her to-day must have been that she is a very pretty girl.”

“How do you know? I have spoken to many more persons than you have.”

“Then can you honestly affirm that one amongst the many used expressions to her disadvantage?”

“Yes, I can. I overheard the old Countess Calcedon ask Miss Theodora Bousfield who she was, and when Miss Theodora told her, she replied that Connie was ‘very animated’—and we all

know what people mean, when they say a girl is *very animated*; they mean that she forgets herself, and lets her spirits run away with her."

"I was not aware of that perversion of terms," said I; "anything more?"

"Then for what she *did*—Dr. Julius Eden was set to dance with her, I am sure against his inclination; for what can a clever man like him find of amusement in a girl hardly out of the schoolroom?, and if *he* consulted his dignity as a physician a little more, it would be as well; I don't know whether doctors have any better right to dance than clergymen. Yet there was he figuring away amongst a parcel of riotous children! But, as I was saying—he was set to dance with Connie, and before they had gone through the first figure, somebody called him away to look at one of the little Calcedon tribe, who had contrived to tumble, and fancy herself killed, and what must Connie do, but turn round to Mr. Charles Maurice, who was looking on, and ask him to finish the quadrille with her. Now, *I* call *that* a great piece of forwardness."

"Charitable people will pardon it, Ursie; and

Charles Maurice is a frank, gentlemanlike young fellow, who would oblige her very willingly."

"Too willingly by half—he coloured up to the roots of his hair with delight! Have you never noticed how he stares at her at church! I have seen his sister Martha give him a poke to make him look at his book many a time. A very little encouragement, and he will be over head and ears in love with her, if he is not so already."

"Then Connie does not know it."

"*Does she not?* She knows very well who likes her, and she is as winning to them as ever she can be."

"Then she cannot help it," returned I roused and angry.

"*Cannot help it!* a pretty excuse, indeed! Then she must be *taught* to help it," was the imperative answer. "At all events I shall speak to mamma about it; for something must be done, or she will turn out a thorough-paced coquette."

"You might just as well say she will turn out a thorough-paced peacock!" cried I, utterly past my patience. "There is not a spark of coquetry in her disposition. She is as good and



modest a girl, as ever breathed: and it is wicked, Ursie, yes, *wicked* and *despicable* to insinuate a word to the contrary!"

"That is *your* opinion—I know you are as blind as a bat to her vanity, but papa and mamma are wiser, and I shall appeal to them."

Which she did that evening in Connie's absence, with great emphasis and solemnity. Both heard her to the end in silence, and then papa replied with sarcastic deliberation,—

"It would be good news to hear that you were yourself as much a favourite as the little one, Ursie. I find it to her credit that Dr. Julius Eden cultivates her acquaintance—he is a man of sense and honour, and he has my leave to do it."

Ursula coloured and looked puzzled for a moment, and then she exclaimed prophetically that though it might be all very well to treat her warning with indifference *now*, she was much mistaken if we had not *some day* occasion to repent it. Connie's thirst for admiration was excessive; of course, if every one combined to encourage her, she could not be expected to mend—but it was of no consequence, and she

did not care ! And then she began to cry, and vehemently aver that it was all my fault, and that, but for me, she never should have spoken on the subject at all ; but I was for ever irritating her by setting up Connie as so much her superior—at which point of unreason her accusations broke down in a gust of sobs, and she rushed out of the room declaring that *nothing* should now prevent her taking a situation, and leaving home, where she was as miserable as the day was long.

But by the morning she had recovered her calm, and forgotten her resolution, and we were all too glad to bury the bones of dissension, to betray in anywise that we had more tenacious memories.

## XXIII.

## DIDACTIC.

URSULA's persistent fault-finding with Connie set me, at last, on attempting to discover some more noble motive and source for it than those of common feminine vanity and jealousy. I asked myself, could she have conceived for Dr. Julius Eden any of those tender sentiments which are apt to make women wilfully unjust to each other? But when I consulted with myself ever so earnestly, I could not say that she had yielded to love unsought. In fact, Ursula was not very susceptible of affectionate impressions, and there was not a grain of passion in all her composition. Her likings and dislikings—especially the latter—were often expressed with vehemence of language, but as nurse Bradshaw used to observe pacifically when we were little, "Ursula's bark was always

worse than her bite," and after detesting a person with abundance of epithets one day, she would meet them the next with every appearance of friendliness.

She certainly liked to talk of Dr. Julius, and even to intimate that he was civil to her beyond common civility, but I never could detect a single sign of preference myself; on the contrary, I should have said that he occasionally indulged himself in a little grave quizzing at the expense of her somewhat obtrusively worn wisdom.

Hitherto we had only met him on the level of a friendly acquaintance, and I felt keenly though secretly annoyed that his name should have been mentioned amongst us in any other sense; assuredly he had never given the slightest ground for its being canvassed and made a source of jealousy and suspicion between my sisters. I must do Connie the justice to say, however, that she had never so used it. She might be sensible, and probably was, that Dr. Julius liked her as most men, I fancy, do like a pretty, pleasant, simple-mannered girl whom they meet in society; but she had not a froth of light feelings

at anybody's service playing on the surface of her character, and she was the last creature in the world to dream herself in love because the occasion was opportune, and an eligible object at hand. She was not a prey, poor Connie, to premature sentimentalisms, but sometimes when I watched the bright, sensitive face, the deep, luminous eyes, the pretty, pretty mouth that would quiver with intensest emotion or close in the steadiest resolve, I have said to myself with a pain of dread and prevision at my heart such as I cannot describe, "Oh, if that child's life gets across with her, what a passionate anguish will she have to endure!"

But be sure I kept my fancies and fears to myself while her life was slipping along from day to day unmarked by herself or others. Time enough for the woman-nature to wake up when the rosy dawn of love is in the sky; meanwhile, in the undisturbed dreams of innocence let it grow and strengthen for whatever peril of passion or tempest of sorrow may await it when the sun becomes hot in the noonday and the restful shadows are all fled away with the toys and tears of youth.

Though I was silent of speech I could not, however, keep my thoughts in the same subjection as my tongue, and whether I would or no, they began to run very frequently on Dr. Julius, who had become interesting to me from every point of view for Connie's sake since those few careless words of Miss Theodora Bousfield's. There was a little trait of secretiveness in Connie's temper which withheld her from any after allusion either to those significant words or to Ursula's unmeaning attack, but I was not satisfied that she had forgotten them; like myself, it was possible that the less she said the more she thought, and that when she appeared sunk, now and then, in such pretty brown studies, she might really be building the most lovely castles in the air that ever rose out of a newly touched imagination.

I cannot plume myself, as some do, on being a deep discerner of character, but I know distinctly why I like certain persons and why I do *not* like certain others; and elegances of manner never effectually mask from my moral instinct the perversions of heart and brain which express themselves in genial selfishness, in plausible sin-



cerity, in pious hypocrisy, or in sentimental coarseness. When we are past the generous age of believing in all things and trusting in everybody, we cannot help knowing and seeing by glimpses some of the evils that underlie the smooth face of society, and what we never hear put into words, instinct warns us away from when we meet it walking out of its proper atmosphere of darkness ever so decently draped and disguised. For instance—we were equally ignorant of the private life of Mr. Tom Claridge and of Dr. Julius Eden when first we met them, but we needed no worldly-wise monitor to tell us that it was disagreeable to meet the eyes of the former, and that we might be as much at our ease with the latter as if he were a brother of our own. Dr. Julius, indeed, was readily recognizable as a well-bred, well-educated, kind-hearted, high-minded English gentleman; Mr. Tom Claridge had the breeding and education of one, and abundance of native talent and sagacity, but he was like Shakspeare's goodly apple, "rotten at the core"—a man from whom modest, sensitive women shrank with absolute avoidance.

Perhaps I need hardly add that he had the worst possible opinion of the sex, and openly espoused the views of some past and gone cynic who said that "women were all alike except their faces."

But Dr. Julius had now become interesting to me with respect to the minor morals of temper, stability, kindness, and common sense, as well as with regard to the more broadly distinctive traits of his character. In the matter of temper he was not without quickness, but he kept it well in hand; for his stability there was testimony enough in his long attachment to Miss Theodora Bousfield; any poor body in Redcross or Scarcliffe afflicted with special disease would witness gratefully to his kindness, and his common sense was evident to the meanest capacity in his simple, successful, respected life. He was generous, moreover, and charitable both in word and act; he had some pride of birth and name; he had taste and personal accomplishments; he had travelled, and seen and conversed with many men in many countries and conditions, and was large-minded in every sense of the expression.

But his character was not without shadows, and deep shadows too. He was determination incarnate. I suppose Dr. Julius Eden would literally have cut off his left hand or plucked out his right eye if it had offended him. He was capable of the deepest, deadliest, most enduring resentments, and his countenance could take such an expression of concentrated contempt as might make the utterly shameless and abandoned shrink before him. When the goodness of his heart turned to gall, truly it was gall of the bitterest. I believe he would have seen the friend he had trusted or the woman he had loved die at his feet without a word, when a word would have saved them, if they had proved faithless to his confidence. The vehemence of his feelings mostly lay quiescent, but one saw it could wake up lion-like when the occasion came, and when it woke that weaker beings would cower before his strength in abject terror. The just anger of a good man is terrible—whether Dr. Julius Eden was always *just* I will not say. Now and for some time to come I knew him only as the pleasant acquaintance who frequented my father's

house because he found its society more or less agreeable; it was not until after certain events, to which I am now coming, had occurred, that I got the key to those darker passions which lay dormant within his heart, waiting their hour and opportunity.

END OF VOL. I.

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